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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

Vol. XXV.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., December 24, 1884.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

No. 322

THE CRIMSON COYOTES; or, Nita, the Nemesis.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,

AUTHOR OF "DIAMOND DICK," "THE TERRIBLE TONKAWAY," "KIT CARSON, JR.," "BIG FOOT WALLACE," ETC.



THE ONLY HUMAN BEING IN SIGHT WAS PEDRO. UPON HANDS AND KNEES EVIDENTLY STUDYING THE SIGN LEFT BY THE PERSON WHO HAD ENTERED THE HOVEL BY THE ROOF AND CARRIED OFF THE GOLD.

The Crimson Coyotes;

OR,

NITA, THE NEMESIS.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"

(MAJOR SAM S. HALL.)

AUTHOR OF "WILD WILL," "DIAMOND DICK,"
"BLACK BRAVO," "BIG FOOT
WALLACE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SCAPE-GOAT OF HIS RACE.

THE historical Alamo City, old San Antonio de Bexar where the life-blood of Bowie, Travis, and Crockett, flowed out and mingled with the gore of scores of their dastardly murderers! The yellow-skinned soldiery of Santa Anna, on the floor of that ancient Mission, the Alamo. It was within the walls of this, that the entire American population of San Antonio were, with the three celebrated men mentioned, butchered, after a gallant and almost superhuman defense—a brutal, cowardly, and wholesale murder followed by a desecration of the dead, that would have made even Apaches blush for shame!

At the time of which we write, which was soon after the close of the Civil War, there was not in all Bexar county, a man supposed to be wealthier than Norman Norrington, a banker and broker, whose place of business was on Commerce street, the principal thoroughfare of San Antonio.

There was no doubt, indeed, that the banker was very wealthy, judging from the amount of business he transacted with the leading capitalists of Western Texas, and the style in which he lived. His home was but a short distance from the Main Plaza, and upon the banks of the beautiful river of the same name as the city, and which boils from the ground, in deep crystal springs, but five miles above the town.

We shall content ourselves with saying, that the home of Norrington, the banker, was not only beautiful in itself, but beautifully situated; it having, upon three sides, high walls formed by vine-clad pecan trees, cool shades, arbors, and finely kept gardens. But a short distance from the front of the dwelling, and in plain view from the veranda, was the road by which the citizens reached the old Missions down the river; a fine drive, or ride, of an evening, and which was enjoyed by hundreds. Norman Norrington was, at this time, some five and fifty years of age, originally from Virginia, and very proud of his ancestry. He was tall, and somewhat spare in figure, with sharp hazel eyes, and dark brown hair which was sprinkled with gray.

He was a widower, with but one child—a daughter, Nora by name, and as beautiful as one could well imagine.

Nora Norrington was seventeen years of age at the time we introduce her to the reader; she having left school but a year previous, and since then learned something of the world from having taken a tour to the East in company with her father. This visit had included New Orleans and Galveston.

Nora was quite a belle, even among the many belles of the Alamo City; no select assemblage being considered complete without her presence.

As a matter of course, she had many admirers; but two of whom, however, we shall have occasion to mention. These two were in the employ of her father, as trusted clerks.

The banker's daughter was of medium height, with dark-brown, wavy, and abundant hair. Her form was well developed, and she was as graceful as a prairie fawn.

One would suppose that the young girl inherited the form and beauty of her dead mother, for, except in the color of her hair, she bore no resemblance whatever to her father.

Her face was Grecian in type, her complexion fair, her eyes light-brown and limpid, as well as poetic in expression. She had long, dark lashes, brows beautifully penciled, and small, shell-like ears.

Perfectly feminine in every way was Nora Norrington, and no one could gaze upon her or into her lovely and expressive eyes, without loving her.

In dress, Nora was a model of exquisite taste, and she was a perfect lady in manners and conversation. She was also, as one would decide upon short acquaintance, capable of loving with great faithfulness and intensity, did she but meet her ideal of perfection in the opposite sex.

But thus far the maiden's life had been uneventful, and gliding along like a summer's dream, with the exception of the time when her mother died, but that was now some years past.

Nora had been provided with a governess—a distant relative, who had, when her fair charge was sent to school, been retained by the banker as housekeeper; but as she was of a morose disposition, there was little in common between her and her former pupil after the maiden's return to her home.

Rodney Reed and Clarence Coleman were the two most trusted clerks of Mr. Norrington, and

it was a wonder to many that the naturally astute old banker should place any confidence in the honesty of the former, whose appearance certainly was not in his favor.

Young Reed was swarthy, black-eyed and treacherous-looking. He had a habit of avoiding the eyes of whoever addressed him, and of starting suddenly at the slightest noise, as if it meant the approach of some danger to himself.

He was of an exceedingly nervous temperament, quick in his movements, strongly built, muscular, and nearly six feet in height. Both he and Coleman were athletes, and excellent horsemen—their exercise in riding, swimming, walking and gymnastics being regular. For all this, they were not associates outside of the business connected with their duties to their employer.

Secretly, Rodney Reed was a gambler.

He frequented a private club-room, where most of his time at night, not indispensable for sleep, was spent. Indeed, he was quite expert with cards, when not indulging too deep in liquor, which, however, was frequently the case with him, although he never missed being on hand to attend to business.

Among his sporting friends he was known as "Red" Reed, having thus been dubbed from the fact that he was never known when "bucking" at monte or faro, to bet on black-spotted cards—he always laying his money on either hearts or diamonds.

Even Clarence Coleman had no suspicion that his fellow-clerk was a gambler, although he knew that Reed drank at times immoderately.

There was no friendship between the two young men, as Coleman doubted the honesty and fidelity of Reed; believing, indeed, that the latter was an unscrupulous villain, and that he would prove himself thus when an opportunity to enrich himself should occur, even though it should be by crime.

Clarence Coleman has already been partially described. In addition, let us say, he was decidedly prepossessing in appearance. His hair was light, almost flaxen, and he wore it long over his shoulders. His eyes were bright-blue and joyous, and his gaze was free and open, as was his speech. He was a favorite with all who came in contact with him.

Outside of business matters, Mr. Norrington had little intercourse with his clerks, although both of them were frequently at his house with papers, and for money and stocks left with him after office hours by rancheros who arrived late or early in the city—these the clerks taking to deposit in the safe at the office on Commerce street.

At the time of which we write, there was much excitement in Texas in regard to the discovery of rich mines in New Mexico and Arizona, and those people who were not engaged in the cattle business, or in horse, sheep or swine breeding, invested much capital in mining stock. This was deposited, to some extent, with Norman Norrington and others in the banking and brokerage line.

Necessity compelled the old banker to intrust the keys of his safe, at times, to one and then to the other of the two clerks who have been introduced to us, a necessity that he was, in connection with one of the two, fated to more than regret—in fact, to curse himself for having been such a fool as to give any one the power of even attempting to ruin him.

Rodney Reed's mother had been a Creole, a woman of most passionate temper and questionable character. Indeed, she ended by taking her own life, after stabbing to death a lover who had upbraided her for deceiving him into the belief that she was a single woman; he having ascertained accidentally that she had a legal husband and a son.

This tragic affair had occurred some years previous to Rodney's obtaining employment of Norman Norrington, and no one in Texas knew anything in regard to the double tragedy which had been for a time, in the long ago, the town talk in New Orleans.

The father of the young man was but little better in character than the mother; but of the two, Rodney most resembled his maternal parent, having her disposition and passions, as well as general appearance.

He was about twenty-two years of age at the time our narrative opens, having been but twelve when he had been deprived of his mother in the shocking manner related.

The publicity of the crime, and the exposure of the wretched woman's character in the public press, together with the comments of the vulgar herd on the tragic affair, served to imbitter young Reed against all mankind. In fact, he was, through the crimes and immorality of his miserable mother, forced, through shame and humiliation, to hold himself aloof from all; and, as his father never manifested any great affection or care for him, except to send him to the North to be educated, Rodney soon left New Orleans.

After wandering about for a time, he reached San Antonio, with sufficient means furnished by his father to keep him from want for some months.

He, however, had not been in the Alamo City

but a few days, when he saw Nora Norrington, and became infatuated with her loveliness—came, in short, to love her as fondly as such a nature as his would admit. His mind was now made up.

He was a good scribe and accountant, and after he had determined—ay, sworn—that he would become acquainted with, and marry the beautiful girl, he set to work to obtain a position in the employment of her father, by bringing letters of recommendation from well known men of standing and wealth in the Crescent City.

Upon presenting these testimonials, young Reed was at once engaged by the banker, as clerk; and, from the moment of this most gratifying success—a success which he had hardly dared hope for—the miscreant commenced to plot and plan the ruin of him who had so kindly employed, and placed entire confidence in him.

In his early shame and humiliation, Rodney Reed had sworn enmity to all mankind, and vowed that he would devote his life to the ruin of every one over whom he could, by any cunning scheme, gain power.

However, in his narrow, selfish, and base mind, he now made one exception: this was Nora Norrington; the villain losing sight of the fact that the maiden would be ruined, body and soul, should she be bent to his will.

Reed's hatred toward Clarence Coleman, upon becoming associated with the latter, and being forced to acknowledge to himself that his fellow-clerk was his superior, far above him in all things, was most intense; and he exulted in the thought that he was in a position where he could work his disgrace and downfall.

Thus was a veritable fiend introduced into the family of the old banker, one who was fated to bring ruin upon him and his; and, with him, one who was his antipodes in every thing.

CHAPTER II.

CRUEL AS THE GRAVE.

BUT, although Rodney Reed hated Clarence Coleman from the very hour that he became associated with him, it was his policy to pretend friendship. This, however, he found a most difficult matter, and one that taxed all his powers of hypocrisy.

When, in his turn, he discovered that Clarence detested him—though he knew it only by intuition—Rodney gloated over the power that he ascertained he held, through his being trusted equally with him; the banker making no discrimination between the two young men in business matters.

It was imprudent for Reed to have formed gambling and drinking associations, under the circumstances; but, although he knew he was jeopardizing his success in his plots and plans to ruin others and enrich himself, he could not break off the habits he had formed early in life. Not for a moment, however, did he allow himself to think of defeat.

He swore that he would cause Clarence Coleman to be considered, and hunted, as a criminal—disgraced beyond all redemption, beyond all power of proving his innocence!

He believed, although he was by no means of the opinion that it was reciprocated, that Clarence was in love with Nora Norrington.

It did not seem reasonable that a maiden of such beauty, wealth, and social position would stoop to marry a man in the employ of her father; yet Reed, by careful study, decided that Nora was one who would go to any extreme where her heart was interested, she being just the opposite of her father in that respect.

It was a beautiful evening in autumn, the southern sun just giving its farewell kiss to the western sky, as Clarence Coleman, habited in a nobby business suit, but wearing upon his head a black, wide-brimmed planter's hat, walked down along the west bank of the San Antonio river, toward the Norrington Mansion. The young man was well worth looking at.

Diogenes, had he met him, would have put down his lantern, extended his hand, and exclaimed:

"Shake! You're the very man I have been seeking."

Or words to that effect.

As we proceed, it will be understood that it is unnecessary for us to enter into a detail of the particulars connected with the previous friendship, which had ripened rapidly into love, between Clarence and Nora.

It was while our young friend was thus proceeding toward the home of the maiden, that the fair girl was herself strolling down the garden paths toward the river. She presented a picture of perfect loveliness, being attired in a costume of some light India fabric, and tastefully trimmed with delicate vines and tiny pink flowerets.

There was an unusual flush upon Nora Norrington's face, and she betrayed some nervousness; casting occasional glances toward the shades up the river, and then turning to look behind, as though apprehensive of her movements being watched. These suspicions were, however, absurd, as far as any member of her

household was concerned; for she had ever been free to roam at will, her father putting no restrictions upon her inclinations about her own home, although he was very particular in regard to the friendships she formed in the city, even among her own sex.

Nora had walked for some distance, when, beside a thicket of flowering shrubs, where the musical ripple of the river around the rocks and amid the reeds filled her ears, she halted; for she perceived, coming toward her, Clarence Coleman.

There was a large log near the spot where the maiden paused, and she now seated herself upon it, nervously plucking some of the flowers that grew near her.

Had she stepped toward the river, amid the bushes that formed the thicket between her and the stream, Nora would have shrieked with startled fright; for, crouched therein, was none other than the miscreant Rodney Reed, her father's clerk, and her own unsought, feared, and detested admirer!

Reed had known nothing of the proposed meeting of the lovers; but, having had his suspicions aroused, he had repaired to the bottom-timber in the vicinity of the Norrington Mansion, upon three different occasions, to satisfy himself whether the maiden, whom he had vowed should be his, really did love Clarence Coleman to the extent of meeting him clandestinely. The Fates, at length, had favored him.

The expression upon the swarthy face of the spy in the thicket betrayed the most intense exultation; though, it was evident that it required a great effort to restrain the wretch from springing out, and clutching the maiden in his vile embrace.

Rodney Reed was not long to remain in ignorance of the love of those two young hearts, those two that seemed created especially for each other; for, upon the halting of Nora, and guided by her glance, the concealed miscreant espied the man whom he so hated approaching from the direction of the city.

No longer did he believe that the strolls of the maiden within the timber were without an object except pleasure and exercise.

It was beyond all doubt that the pair were meeting by appointment—meeting secretly, and as lovers!

One glance between the foliage showed the lurker, in the flushed face, and the joyous, yet apprehensive manner, of Nora Norrington, a love that was both deep and lasting; and, not only this, but that her preference was kept a secret from her own father.

The jealous rage, that now surged and boiled in the breast of the cowardly spy, was truly terrible to behold.

His swarthy face became ashen in hue. His fingers tore into the sward spasmodically, and his wolfish teeth ground in impotent madness. His black and treacherous eyes flashed glances from one to the other of the handsome pair, as if he would pierce their very hearts with the arrows of his hate.

The plot he had previously formed, through hatred born of the consciousness of his inferiority in appearance and character to Clarence Coleman, would not now satisfy the hellish hate that sprung into birth, and ruled the entire being of Rodney Reed, the moment he realized that Clarence and Nora loved each other; and that, beyond all doubt, they had held frequent interviews in secret, on previous occasions. The thought was madness.

The joy and love that beamed upon the face of Clarence Coleman, as he quickened his pace upon perceiving the one he sought, was beautiful to behold. It softened his glance and expression to a degree that was almost feminine. Not a word did he speak, to break the soft silence of the breezeless eve. Directly in front of Nora, the young man strode, and then stretched himself upon the ground at her feet, taking one of her small and shapely hands in his own.

A most heavenly moment it was to those young, loving hearts.

A most hellish moment to that vile miscreant spy, who writhed within himself, a volcano of jealous hate and murderous fury seething in his breast and brain!

"Nora!"

That one word fell softly and lovingly from the lips of Clarence Coleman.

"Clarence," was the whispered response; those two words, and the tone in which they were spoken, expressing more than a thousand and one reiterations of undying love.

"Heaven bless you, Nora, for thus proving your regard for one so far beneath you in wealth or station, but who loves, who adores you more than life—more than aught else that Heaven can offer!"

"Do not speak in that way, I beg of you, Clarence: it is wrong—wicked!"

"Forgive me, darling! But I cannot, in weaker words, express my undying love for you. I am not one to ask your father to give me his daughter's hand, until I am on an equal footing with him.

"I loved you, Nora, at first sight, but I suffered the tortures of the lost when I thought of

the absurdity of that love. I dared not even dream that you would treat me as a friend and equal in the presence of others; consequently when, at last, like a halo of golden light, the consciousness that you loved me burst upon my soul, I was transported into the seventh heaven of delight.

"I believe I should, in the end, have gone mad had you not manifested a regard for me. I am fully aware, however, that it would be impossible, even in many years of service in my present capacity, to accumulate sufficient to give you a home equal to that which I would ask you to leave; therefore I have decided to leave San Antonio, and seek a fortune among the mining regions."

As Clarence said this, the satisfaction of Reed was shown plainly upon his face.

An expression of pain passed over the countenance of Nora; perhaps the first real anguish that had broken in upon her young love, but certainly not the last.

"Clarence," she said, "do not speak of leaving, especially of going so far away! Is it not enough that we are rich in each other's love? As to the difference in station you speak of, all are born equal; and, at death, all must sleep the same sleep.

"Human pride. I believe to be sinful. The basis of such pride among us is wealth, and wealth may, at any day, take wings. Then pride, broken and humiliated, leaves its victim a wreck, stranded on a barren shore."

"Why, Nora, you are quite a philosopher! I declare, I had not thought you so deep a thinker. I am proud, my darling, very proud of you and your love. But, for all that, in connection with my position in this selfish world, there is no combating the fact, that I am far beneath you. As to my family, I am a scion of a good old Kentucky stock, and my education has been all that I could reasonably expect or desire.

"I have relatives who have not only wealth, but political influence. I ask no favors, however, from any one. I hope, my dear Nora, you do you not altogether condemn that kind of pride?"

"Indeed, I do not, Clarence! It is commendable in you, and I admire your independence of spirit. You could not act and think otherwise, and be yourself."

"Thanks, Nora, but you see, for all that, here I am meeting the daughter of my rich and aristocratic employer—I, a mere clerk meeting clandestinely the beautiful daughter of Norman Norrington!

"Now, that is truly humiliating for me to think of, for I am naturally free and open; and, if I do say it, myself, am devoid of hypocrisy. All this must end, and shortly. It is hard for me to leave you, Nora, but I must do it. I have already ceased to take any interest in business here, and have begun to entertain the most unreasonable hopes in regard to winning a fortune elsewhere."

"Why not tell papa everything, Clarence? He might accept the inevitable, and advance you in business—perhaps take you as a partner."

"My dear Nora, you must know that what you propose is too absurd. Mr. Norrington would listen to me in the utmost astonishment and indignation, and would end by ordering me from his presence, and his employ."

The young girl sighed, as she returned: "It may be as you apprehend, Clarence; but, it does appear to me that papa would consider my happiness more than you infer. He has never denied me anything that was reasonable."

"Just so. And he would assert that nothing could be more unreasonable than your having degraded yourself to such an extent as to meet, even on terms of friendship, one of his employees."

The maiden's face assumed a worried and anxious expression.

"Nora, what is it that troubles you?" asked the young man quickly. "I shall begin to wish that I had died before meeting you, if I am to bring clouds about your bright young life. I would rather lose my right arm than that you should suffer one hour of sorrow through me. You knew naught but happiness until I crossed your path."

"You are very changeable, Clarence."

"Since I met you, Nora—yes! I admit that, in some things I am. My brain is in a whirl. But in the grand object which I have before me, I am firm and immovable."

"For all that, I scarce dare think of our parting. My exile will seem an eternity of anxiety and anguish, but which I must combat and crush down."

"Please do not speak again of leaving San Antonio!" pleaded Nora. "Let us hope and pray that some opening may occur to give you an opportunity to win wealth in the Alamo City."

"But I must tell you why I looked troubled just now. I shuddered at the mere thought of being left, as it would seem to me, alone; for, should you leave San Antonio, I should be always hopeless and despondent. Besides that, I should be in almost constant terror and appre-

hension from a source that I have never mentioned either to papa or yourself."

"Why, what can you mean, Nora? You alarm me. Who, or what, can work you harm in my absence?"

"It is nothing that should cause immediate alarm, so please don't get excited, Clarence. I begin to think that it would be almost foolish in me to tell you. You are so impetuous that you might cause trouble which we should rather seek to avoid."

"You have gone too far now, Nora," said the young man; "but I'll promise to keep cool."

The maiden smiled, but hesitated a moment before speaking.

"Very well; I suppose it must be told, but I know you will think me very imaginative and silly to entertain the fears that I do. To begin, however, I wish to ask you a question which I have long desired to put to you. What is your opinion of Rodney Reed?"

The spy in the thicket pricked his ears at this, to him, most personal and interesting question. He began to perceive that Nora Norrington, if Clarence should leave the city, would be afraid of his forcing his presence and unwelcome attentions.

"I have never yet spoken of a man, behind his back, words which I would not say to his face, should occasion require it," answered her lover; "and I will say to you, Nora, that which I presume I shall have cause to say to the face of the man himself, if I remain here any length of time. And these words are, that he is an unmitigated rascal; one who, to enrich himself, and carry out a pet object, would commit, I really believe, the most dastardly crimes in the calendar."

"It was a great surprise to me when your father employed him, for Mr. Norrington has seen much of the world, and of men; and should know by Rodney Reed's face, and those treacherous eyes of his, that avoid the glances of all whom he meets, that he is a villain, and not to be trusted."

"I firmly believe that Reed forged the letters of introduction that gained him his present situation, and more than that, I suspect that he now meditates the robbery of the safe. Indeed, that has been one very strong reason why I wished to leave the bank. But what connection has this delectable character with the fears and apprehensions you have hinted at?"

"Clarence, I have formed the same opinions of Rodney Reed that you have, except that I have not thought of his robbing papa, unless it might be of his daughter."

"Don't laugh at me, Clarence! I am positive that that wretch has determined, in his vile heart, to abduct me if there is any chance for him to do so. Whenever he and I have been placed near each other, at his occasional visits to papa, his hateful attentions have been such that I cannot even attempt to describe them to you."

"At times I have been about to cry out, when he would hiss in my ear:

"Betray me if you dare! I am your master!"

"His very presence fills me with loathing and repugnance, as well as terror. I shun him as I would a poisonous snake, yet there are times when he contrives to get beside me. He is a vile wretch, and is capable of any crime."

"I loathe and detest him! And yet I dare not, for some unknown and mysterious reason, inform my father. I think it must be from a conviction I have that Reed will kill the man who first calls him to account for his insults to me."

"You mistake," cried Clarence Coleman, springing to his feet, "you mistake, Nora Norrington, for I will kill Rodney Reed!"

Nora clung to the young man in mingled amazement and concern.

She had not dreamed Clarence capable of the strong emotion and ungovernable fury displayed by him at the revelation she made of Reed's dastardly conduct.

"Oh, Clarence, I do wish I had not told you this! You do not—surely you do not mean what you say!"

"Yes, I repeat it—I swear it, by my hopes of heaven!" continued the young man in his excitement, "that Rodney Reed, the contemptible coward, shall crawl in abject terror at your feet, and beg your pardon, or he shall die by my hand. It is—"

At that instant there was a whirring sound in the air, followed by a heavy thud, and the handsome form of Clarence Coleman fell backward over the log, the blood welling from his head, beside which lay the blood-stained stone which had felled him!

Nora saw the blood filtering through his wavy locks, his face growing pallid, and his eyes sightless in insensibility, and with a shriek she sunk beside her lover, both of them as unconscious as the log that lay near them.

Then, out from the thicket stole Rodney Reed, with the look of an exultant fiend upon his face.

Recovering the missile he had used, he hurled the same into the river. Then, shaking his clinched fist at the prostrate pair, he filled the

hat of Clarence with water, dashed it over the prostrate pair, and then rushed into the shades of the thicket, and on up the river toward the city, just as the silvery moon cast her mellow light, aslant from the east, over the earth.

CHAPTER III. CUMULUS CLOUDS.

THE cool water which the miscreant had cast upon the heads and faces of the man whom he had in so cowardly a manner felled to the earth, and the maiden who, he had sworn by all the fiends, should one day be his wife—this revived poor Nora Norrington shortly after the wretch himself had vanished.

The young girl moaned, pressed her hands upon her brow, and then arose and gazed around in the utmost bewilderment and terror, at realizing that she was in the shades, and by moonlight.

Not until she caught a glance of the form and face of her lover did Nora recall the near past, and she could scarce repress a cry of horror and anguish when she beheld the blood upon the head of Clarence Coleman.

Instinctively she gazed around the shades with starting eyes, as if expecting to see some fiendish shape, which might be about to rush upon her with evil intent. But her anxiety for Clarence caused her to banish all fears for self, and she caught up the hat of the senseless man and rushed to the river-bank—returning after having filled it with the cool water, with which she washed away the blood from the young man's head and face.

In a moment or two, to Nora's great relief, her patient began to move; and at the first return of consciousness, as he recalled the circumstances of his position, he sprang to his feet, crying out:

"What is it, Nora; what has occurred? Did not some one tell me, from behind, with a club?"

"Oh, Clarence, do not ask me! It is terrible. But I do not really know what happened. I heard a sound, and next I saw you stretched out upon the ground, and then I fell senseless myself. Who could have done it?"

"Whoever it was, he brought water, and threw it upon our faces; for my hair was saturated, and so was yours. Oh, what can it mean? I have a presentiment that this is but the beginning, the first link of a chain of troubles that now threaten us!"

"I'll tell you what it means, Nora. It means that there will be a tragic event close following this cowardly deed, if I can get proof of who the dastardly wretch was that did it!"

"I am confident I can place my hand upon him within an hour. It must have been a stone that was hurled at me—thrown by some sneaking spy, who was hidden in that thicket, and who heard every word of our conversation. As our talk related largely to Rodney Reed, it leaves no doubt in my mind as to who my assailant was. Well, let it be so.

"He has heard what I know and believe, and henceforth it is war to the knife between us. But, come; let me escort you to the garden. You must at once retire, for you are out beyond your usual hour.

"Don't worry about me. I shall take no steps toward revenge, until I get all the proofs that I need. The villain will show his hand now, without doubt. He is all that I have said—a cowardly miscreant, who will commit any crime to forward his ends.

"Stay! I had forgotten. I must go to your father, get some money and papers from him, carry them to the office, and lock them in the safe. I have the keys and combination to-night. After you have reached the house, I will bathe my head, bind my handkerchief about the wound, and then pull my hat over it; for, as I usually find Mr. Norrington sitting on the veranda, he will not be likely to notice any change in my appearance.

"Think as little about this affair, my darling, as you can help. We are warned now, and I shall begin at once to act. But, remember one thing; no harm shall come to you while I live. There, now, good-by for the present; and let nothing disturb your innocent slumbers. I'm all right!"

Rapidly, and in considerable excitement, Clarence Coleman rattled off these words, allowing the young girl neither time nor opportunity to speak; but Nora was so dumfounded by what had happened, and by all that she had heard in regard to Rodney Reed, that she was in reality speechless. She was also greatly worried on account of the probability of her absence being discovered at that unusual hour; or that Reed would in some manner, betray the fact to her father, that she had met Clarence clandestinely, and that she and the young man were lovers.

Consequently, Nora was in a state of great trepidation and anxiety; and she clung almost distractedly to Clarence, as they stood on the border of the undergrowth.

He gently pushed her from him, and she stole quietly to the house, fortunately reaching her chamber without being observed.

Changing her dress and rearranging her hair with nervous haste, Nora entered one of the

upper rooms which commanded a view of the front veranda. There she perceived her father, in his favorite chair, enjoying his cigar.

Nora did not feel in a state of mind to converse with him, fearing he might notice her strangeness and unnatural manner, which she was conscious of, yet was unable to cast off. She felt, although she could in no way account for the feeling, that an overpowering cloud of despair and horror was descending upon her young life, to quench out all the heavenly happiness, the blissful and ecstatic joy that she had dreamed of since she had met, and loved, and fully realized that she was loved in return—ay, adored, by Clarence Coleman!

Of course she would not have experienced these strange feelings and forebodings of some coming evil that would blight her love and life, had not the, to her, most fearful event happened in the bottom-timber; yet she felt that all that was nothing compared with what waited for her in the near future.

She knew that Rodney Reed had heard every word that had passed between her and Clarence, and that it was he who had felled her lover to the earth.

She was as confident of this as she would have been had she actually seen the miscreant as he lay crouched in the thicket.

She also knew that Reed, had he so wished, could have finished his dastardly work; slaying his victim, while he and she lay senseless, and were at his mercy.

He could have clutched her, and borne her away, had he so wished; and, as she was confident that he was not only capable of doing such a deed, but that he really had it in his mind to do it—she felt that he had formed some plot, which would have been interfered with by abducting her on that particular occasion, but that he had only postponed the time when he should take her from her home, her father, and Clarence.

Nora also believed that Reed hated her lover, and that he intended to kill him; and, as he had not done the deed when it was easy of accomplishment, it strengthened her belief that the villain had formed a plot, to carry out which would depend upon the presence of herself and Clarence—that he did not wish to take the life of his rival at present, but that he had a more hellish fate in store for him, as well as for herself.

With a perfect whirlpool of torturing thoughts and awful pictures in her mind, Nora Norrington sat in the parlor, hardly conscious of her surroundings, until she heard the step of her lover on the veranda.

Instantly she sprang to her feet, and peered between the curtains.

She saw Clarence approach her father, who was sitting quite in the shade; and she knew that he would notice nothing unusual about his visitor. Not for the world, would the maiden have had her father know that Clarence Coleman was her accepted lover, until in her own good time and manner, she saw fit to inform him.

For this reason, she dared not tell her parent of the insulting manner of Rodney Reed, or of his murderous assault on Clarence; for she had long entertained suspicions that Reed was aware of the mutual regard of herself and his fellow clerk, and that he would, upon the slightest pretense, reveal it to her father.

Norman Norrington was a man of few words, and his remarks were brief, as he passed a packet of papers to Clarence, when the latter reached his side of the piazza.

"Take these, and place them in the safe, Coleman! And, by the way, I wish you would copy those papers I gave you last night. Montgomery will call here early in the morning for them, on his way to his ranch on the Medina. He cannot well wait until office hours, and if he could you would be obliged to do them early in the morning. Can you manage it?"

"All right, sir; I'll copy them to-night. Where shall I leave them?"

"Bring them here, and place them on my desk in the library. I have some letters to write, and will not probably retire until you return. It is quite sultry, and I feel like anything but sleeping.

"In any event the front door will not be locked, and, should I retire before you return, I will leave a lamp burning."

"Very well, sir; I will bear your directions in mind. Good-night, if I don't see you when I come back!"

"Good-night, Coleman! But, by the way, where is Reed? Can you not get him to assist you in that copying?"

"I don't care to seek him, Mr. Norrington. Thanks, all the same—I will do it alone. Once more, good-night, sir!"

"Good-night," repeated the old banker, in an absent manner.

Had Clarence Coleman known the circumstances connected with the next visit he would make to the Norrington Mansion, he would have been paralyzed with horror, and driven to the borders of insanity; but he dreamed not, nor did Nora, nor the old banker himself, of the horrors with which that eventful night was pregnant, although they were, even now, cast-

ing their dark shadows upon the mind and heart of poor Nora.

The latter had heard every word that had been uttered by Clarence and her father, and she had been surprised at the command her lover held over himself, especially when the name of Rodney Reed was mentioned.

Nora was also surprised that her father should require this night work of Clarence, and more than surprised to hear him say that he expected to be up late, writing letters.

She had never before known him to ask a clerk to deprive himself of sleep to do office work, neither had she ever known him to sit up at night over his correspondence; in fact Mr. Norrington was in the habit of dictating his letters to one of his clerks.

Nora felt that it would be impossible, in her state of mind, to sleep. She therefore decided that she would recline upon a lounge in the darkest corner of the apartment, and remain thus until Clarence returned from the city with the papers; even should that be among the small hours of the morning.

At once the young girl sought her proposed place of rest, but not for a long time to sleep, for something of fearful moment oppressed her mind, against which she was powerless to combat, or even to reason.

Norman Norrington remained on the veranda, placidly gazing out on the moonlit vista, and enjoying his fragrant Havana.

How thankful we should be that an all-wise Providence has placed it beyond human power to foretell, or pierce the future, else what a gloomy world this of ours would be!

CHAPTER IV.

BEGINNING HIS WORK.

WHEN Rodney Reed left the scene of his cowardly deed, which came so near being a dastardly murder, he rushed like a madman through the timber until he reached a point from which he must advance through fields and between residences, to the street which led to the Main Plaza.

Panting with exertion, he threw himself upon the ground and burst out in soliloquy, his voice hoarse and unnatural, and terrible in the intensity of the passion and fury that raged within him:

"No doubt of it now—none in the least! It is as I thought. She loves him, and he, her—the soft-headed fool! His head is not so soft though, or that stone would have crashed through his confounded skull!"

"I should have hated myself forever, had I, in my mad and jealous fury, killed him. That would be but poor revenge. I'll wring both their hearts, till I cause their brains to burst. I'll torture them, body and soul, until they both curse the day they first saw the light.

"From this night, no more cant, no more straining of will to curb my thirst for revenge. Henceforth, I am what I am—a thief, a merciless murderer, a desperado! Everything now in the crooked line, that leads to gain, to gold and to revenge!

"It was a black day, old man Norrington, when you took me into your employ—a black day for you and yours, and for Clarence Coleman. Never have I loved or dreamed what love was until I met Nora Norrington. At the same time I hate her; yet she shall be mine, though all the fiends stood between me and her!

"Will those two suspect who it was that lurked in the thicket and threw the stone? Indeed, yes; for they will reason that no one but myself could have become so infuriated at their words, and at discovering that they loved each other. By Heavens! I have started the ball, and it shall roll on now without hesitation, crushing out all joy and hope from their hearts!

"Then Nora Norrington shall be a witness of her lover's death, while I whisper in her ear that she is mine—mine, body and soul, forever. Ha! ha! Balk me—me, Red Reed, will they?

"By Heaven! I'll give to my cognomen a far different meaning than it was given me for—the red shall mean blood!

"I'll wash my hands in blood, I'll dabble in gore, and glory in splitting hearts—hearts that shall be bursting with anguish, and brains that shall burn with terror, and through me!

"Ha! ha! Scorn Red Reed, do you? Detest Red Reed, do you, Nora Norrington? By the eternal, I'll give you good cause for entertaining those amiable feelings toward me! But I have work to do, much work, and I must begin to-night.

"First, I must find a stone, as I return up-river, and smear it with blood, as was that which knocked Coleman senseless. I believe I have a use for it, and also for the knife that I abstracted from him. On, Red Reed—on to vengeance!"

Rising to his feet, the miscreant hastened to the city, avoiding the notice of all who were astir.

Soon he reached the office of the banker.

There were two rooms—a reception-room

which opened on the street, and a side room communicating with the same, the safe and the desks of the clerks being in the latter.

Taking a skeleton key from his pocket, and keeping close watch to avoid the observation of evening strollers, Reed unlocked the door and entered, and then closed and relocked it. He then crawled beneath a lounge near the desks and safe.

Again Rodney Reed was acting the part of a spy, every sense strained, he believing that the one grand time of his life was approaching—the moment which would place riches within his grasp, and what was even more, revenge!

Some time elapsed, and curses low but deep came from the villain beneath the lounge, his cramped position being far from comfortable.

Eventually, the well-known step of the man he so detested was heard upon the stone walk outside, and much to the joy of the lurker he heard no other footsteps and no voices in conversation. Clarence Coleman was alone, and all was well.

The key grated in the lock, and the door swung open. Clarence passed within a couple of feet of the place of Rodney's concealment, causing the coward to cringe with fear.

But Coleman went to the safe, muttering the combination in a low tone, as he turned the key in the complicated lock.

Reed craned his neck from beneath the lounge, and listened intently. He had a duplicate key, which he had manufactured himself, but which was useless without he obtained the combination.

After depositing the papers and money in the safe, Clarence seated himself at his desk, and began copying with rapidity.

As the back of his rival was toward him, Reed could gaze at Clarence without danger of detection. To his satisfaction and joy, he saw, when his victim removed his hat, that his head was bandaged. He was both surprised and indignant, however, when he saw that Coleman had evidently commenced a long task of copying.

He recognized the papers.

All was plain.

Mr. Norrington had ordered Clarence to copy them that night.

This would not have been done, had not the banker expected Montgomery to call at his house, early the following morning.

The probability then was, that Clarence would take the copies to Mr. Norrington, when he had finished, as he would not feel like rising at a sufficiently early hour in the morning to deliver them.

Taking into consideration the importance of the documents, and the hurry of the ranchero to obtain copies; also the habits of the latter, Reed felt certain that his deductions were correct. Having thus decided, the murderous exultation of the villain became stamped upon his face.

He was, he believed, favored by the Fates.

He had not dreamed of events proving thus favorable to his plot.

Clarence Coleman was at his mercy.

A terrible revenge was, at last, in his power, and that very night!

He could, at one fell blow, destroy those whom he hated, enrich himself, and place Nora Norrington at his mercy.

A more hellish revenge than that which the vile dastard intended could not well be imagined.

Red Reed was on thorns, when he became convinced that Clarence intended to remain some time; although, upon reflecting that probably his hated rival would proceed again to the Norrington Mansion during the night, which would give him the opportunity he wanted—the scoundrel became reconciled to some extent.

He resolved, however, that he would escape to the street and down the river, as his presence at his employer's house was imperative, and he must reach it previous to the arrival of Coleman.

With the stealthy movements of a panther, the miscreant crawled from beneath the lounge and to the door.

He turned the key so slowly and carefully that no sound was produced, and with the same encouraging success, he manipulated the knob and opened the door slightly.

Thus far all was well, and his future movements would not be difficult of accomplishment without producing alarm.

Then it was that Reed, in his exultation, thought that he would leave a slight reminder of his presence which would cause his intended victim in the terrible time to come to curse himself for having been so careless as not to have made sure, after his experience on the bank of the river, that the same enemy was not lurking in the rooms of the old banker.

This could be easily done.

He gently drew the key from the lock, and by a string that was upon a table in the middle of the apartment, he suspended it to the chandelier, allowing considerable slack-string. This done, he gave the key a slight swing, setting it in motion like a pendulum.

He then quickly stepped out upon the sidewalk, first making sure that no pedestrians were

near, and closing the door after him with care, inserting the skeleton key and turning it.

At that moment a horned toad jumped against his leg, and he at once thought of the use he could make of it. Catching the bactrian, he again unlocked the door and placed it inside; when, after making all fast, he started for the Main Plaza.

Passing that well-known hostelry, the Bull's Head, he drew down his hat over his face, assuming an intoxicated appearance; and succeeding, as he believed, in escaping recognition as he went along.

Soon he reached the river-bottom, south of the city; and, striding to the bank, he stooped, and cast water into his mouth, which now seemed parched and burning.

As he hastened down-stream beneath the shades, now and then an arrow of moonlight shot downward upon his swarthy face, which bore the stamp of villainy. His eyes had a strange and unnatural expression. In fact there was a look upon his countenance that would have caused a detective to follow him, satisfied that here was a man bent upon some terrible crime.

Upon reaching the spot where the interview between the lovers had taken place, and where, from his concealment in the thicket, he had witnessed that interview, Reed sprung upon a rock that projected above the waters of the river; and, thrusting his hand and arm beneath the surface, he brought up a stone of a size that could be partly encircled with the fingers when held in the hand.

Muttering his satisfaction, the miscreant then sprung back upon the bank; and, going to the place where Clarence Coleman had been felled to the earth, he searched until he found the place where the head of his rival had lain. There he found, as he had expected, a pool of blood.

Smearing the stone with the same, and rising, Rodney Reed cast his arms upward in a wild manner, the blood-stained missile clutched; and, with hissed words of vengeful meaning, he rushed through the shades toward the home of the banker.

Drawing from his belt a glittering silver-handled bowie-knife, he circled it about his head.

As he rushed onward, he held the knife in front of him, with the silver-handle plain in view.

And, upon the handle of that bowie, was engraved a name, which, as he traced the letters with keen glance caused the miscreant to give utterance to an exclamation of murderous triumph.

The name, deep cut in the silver, was "Clarence Coleman."

CHAPTER V.

MURDER MOST FOUL.

SKULKING from bush to bush, and in the dark shade of arbors and tall shrubs, Rodney Reed passed through the garden, and crouched amid the climbing vines at the veranda in the rear of the Norrington Mansion.

Here he halted, listening intently, but all was as silent as death itself in and around the princely home of the old Virginian.

The excessive nervousness and excitement of the dastard would not allow him to remain long inactive. He stole along the base of the veranda, screened by the vines and climbing roses, until he reached the front of the house; when, peering through the foliage, he could hardly suppress a cry of startled amazement, for, within three feet of him, sat Norman Norrington in his easy-chair, and evidently asleep.

Reed was furious at this discovery.

Should the old banker remain thus, he would be forced to postpone his plans, and he felt that postponement meant failure.

Everything, thus far, had not only worked to favor him, but many occurrences had happened upon which he had not counted, which had made his schemes seem all the more easy of accomplishment.

Y t even this discovery, upon a moment's reflection, caused Rodney Reed some gratification; for he did not believe the old banker would have remained so late from his couch, had he not been awaiting the return of Clarence Coleman.

However, he resolved not to be balked in one single branch of his pre-arranged plans.

The banker must be awakened, without his suspecting any one to be near, or to have had an agency in disturbing him.

Time was precious.

Reed wished Norrington to be in his library, which was in a retired corner of the building, although on the ground floor.

He determined that the old man should go there.

Doubtless, if aroused from his sleep, Norrington would at once proceed to that very room, more especially if he was now only awaiting the papers from the office.

Otherwise Reed cared little to what room his intended victim went, provided he left the veranda, which was too public a place for his murderous purpose.

Stealing to a clump of tall, ornamental

pampas-grass, Reed broke off a long stem, and returning to his former position, thrust the head of the grass through the vines, brushing it over the face of the sleeper. This had the desired effect. The old man sprang from his chair and brushed his hand across his face hurriedly.

There were many bats darting through the night air, and doubtless Mr. Norrington believed one of these had brushed its wings over his face, for his surprised manner soon vanished.

Then he clasped his hands behind his back, cleared his throat, and strode toward the main entrance of the dwelling. Before going in, the banker gazed for a moment in the direction of the city.

This delighted the spy, for it was evident that the old gentleman thought it about time for Clarence Coleman to return.

Reed was now greatly impatient and excited.

Should Clarence arrive before he could accomplish his murderous object, or while in the accomplishment of it, he would be lost, and his own life placed in jeopardy.

Thus far all had gone well.

Everything had worked to his advantage.

Norman Norrington entered the mansion, and Red Reed, bracing his coward nerves by swallowing a copious draught of brandy from a flask which he carried, stole upon the veranda, and crawling across, parted the curtains of the parlor window.

The light was dim, but Red Reed at once caught sight of a female figure lying upon a lounge within a few feet of him.

He knew that the maiden he so loved, and at the same time hated, was before him—none other than Nora Norrington.

Hissing a curse of disappointment and anger, he crouched behind the curtains.

A moment or two of intent listening convinced him that Nora was in a deep slumber.

The intruder resolved that it should be still deeper. He had come prepared for such contingencies.

Procuring a small vial from an inner pocket, he drew the cork, holding the bottle at arm's length above his head, and then saturated a handkerchief with the contents.

It was chloroform.

This he held to the nostrils of the poor girl, just as she moaned in her sleep, and cried out, in a voice of terror:

"Oh, Clarence! That demon, Rodney Reed, has murdered you!"

These words fairly infuriated Reed.

He pressed the handkerchief hard over the maiden's mouth and nose, and soon she lay still and silent as a corpse.

He then stole from the apartment, the murderous glare deepened in his serpent-like eyes, one hand clutching the bowie and the other the blood-smeared stone.

Knowing well every apartment of the house, the wretch made his way in the dim light through the music-room to the library door, from which, even as he stood peering into the gloom, he could hear the sound of the scratching of a match, and then an impatient ejaculation as the same failed to ignite.

A sufficient glow from the moonlight penetrated the library windows to cause objects to be discernible, and the dastardly villain thus caught sight of the banker's form, which was outlined against a window.

With the caution of a panther, Red Reed stole rapidly forward, depositing the stone upon the desk as he passed it. Then, pulling his sleeves upward toward his elbows, and with the bowie tightly clinched in his right hand, he sprang forward just as the banker was about to strike a second match.

The muscles of the assassin were strained to the utmost.

All that he cared to live for depended upon the moment, and with a strength born of hatred and revenge, he thrust his left hand over the right shoulder of his victim, clutched his throat, and with the desperation born of his position, whirled him about. At the same moment he plunged the bowie to the hilt in the old man's left breast, leaving the blade in the death-wound, and then clutching the arm of his horror-stricken and mortally-wounded victim!

The scene that followed was fearful.

A strong man, with the clutch of his murderer upon his throat, and the dastard's knife in his vitals, writhing in an endeavor to release himself and shriek an alarm.

Arms and legs intertwined, rolling over and over in the darkness, overturning the chairs—thus it was for a full minute. Then all strength left Norman Norrington forever!

There he lay beside his desk, his proud, pallid face upturned, and the silver-handled bowie-knife projecting from his breast, with the name of Clarence Coleman engraved thereon!

Thus dead, without even a parting word to his loved and only child, who lay but a few yards from him, stupefied by the drug that had been administered by the murderer!

And there, above the corpse, with blood-stained hands clinched and outstretched, with snake-like eyes glaring, set, and glassy, fixed upon the dead face of his victim—his own face

as colorless—thus stood Red Reed, the assassin, as rigid as if turned to stone!

The dastardly deed was done!

No sound came to the ears of the murderer to indicate that any human beings had been awakened by the brief struggle.

Thus, for a minute, stood Red Reed; his hand and clothing, his very soul stained red with the life blood of his employer. Then he caught up the stone that he had brought from the river, dipped it in the fresh blood, and then placed it in the hand of the murdered man; closing the death-chilling fingers about it.

He then darted to the door of the apartment, jerking a revolver from his belt.

But there came no sound to his ears.

He swallowed another gulp or two of the brandy; and stood, while his breath came and went, in labored gasps.

The flit of bats' wings beneath the veranda roof, near the window of the library, caused the miscreant to spring backward, and tremble as if stricken with an ague-fit; while instantly, the snap of the lock, as he cocked his revolver, sounded with startling distinctness through the rooms.

Red Reed sprang about, and brought his weapon to an aim at the doorway, as if he expected a witness to his cowardly crime to appear. Then a low, taunting laugh burst from his lips—a look of bravado and desperation taking the place of fright and apprehension—and he gave a hurried, but scrutinizing inspection to the room, placing the chairs once more in position.

This done, the dastard stole on his return to the parlor; but making a sudden halt, as if struck with a new idea, for he tapped his forehead with his knuckles.

He strode out upon the veranda, but kept himself concealed by the vine-covered supporting posts, and gazed up the river toward the city; both along the border of the timber, and the river road, where the view was not obstructed by mesquites.

But not a human being was in sight, and silence still reigned around the Norrington Mansion.

Most dreadful were the expression and appearance of the blood-stained assassin, as he stood there, on the veranda of the beautiful home, from which he had banished happiness, and which he had filled with horror and unspeakable anguish.

But his hell-born work was not yet done.

He had projected another fiendish deed, and he had no time to spare.

Returning, in hot haste, he caught up the senseless form of poor Nora Norrington in his arms, leaving the print of his gore-smeared hand wherever he touched her snowy costume—leaving the blood of the father upon the daughter—the murderer clutching the angelic child of his victim in his vile embrace, before that victim was yet cold in death!

Could there be any more inhuman, more hellish act?

Most certainly, if Red Reed possessed a heart, it must have been one of stone; for he carried Nora into the very room where lay her murdered father, and seated the senseless maiden in a chair, in such a position that, when she recovered and opened her eyes, the first object that met her view, would be the gory corpse!

Most assuredly the wretch's hatred of Nora Norrington must have been uppermost in his mind at that moment.

Only an instant more did Red Reed linger beneath the roof he had so terribly cursed; for he feared the return of Clarence Coleman at any moment, and he could hardly suppress a yell of exultation when he contemplated the terrible tableau which he had prepared for his detested rival—one that would furnish proofs, and convicting proofs, against Clarence, as the robber and murderer of his employer, Norman Norrington!

CHAPTER VI.

HE CAME TOO LATE.

RODNEY REED had not been gone five minutes from the office of his employer, when Clarence Coleman became aware that there was a strange and unaccountable noise in the adjoining room.

It was the horned-toad jumping against different articles in the room, as Reed had been confident the reptile would, when he placed it within the door.

Clarence at once took his lamp, and went into the reception-room, where, to his great amazement, he saw the key suspended to the chandelier. He glanced at the lock of the door, and saw that the key he had left there was no longer in its place.

Taking the suspended key, he found it to be the one belonging to the lock. Examining the door, he found it to be fastened as he had left it.

Here was a mystery.

Clarence decided that some one was in the room, or had been there.

Yet, it was unaccountable in what manner one could have left the room when the door was locked, and the only key to it swaying from the chandelier.

He examined the room, but no one was anywhere to be seen.

The back door was secured by a heavy iron bolt, and the windows also were fastened on the inside.

Clarence Coleman opened the door, and gazed down Commerce street toward the bridge, and then up toward the Main Plaza; yet he could discover no one who was walking singly, all the pedestrians being in pairs, or in gangs.

Greatly mystified, the young man closed and relocked the door. He returned to his desk, rested his head upon his hands, his elbows on the desk, and pondered deeply for some time.

His reasoning eventually brought him to the conclusion spoken of in his words of warning, which he then wrote, and laid in a prominent place upon his desk.

The perplexity and wonder that had been visible in his face vanished, as he set himself to his task of copying, with an air that was defiant and determined. He felt that there could be no doubt as to who it was, that had been in the reception-room since his arrival in the bank.

He was as positive as though he had seen him, that it was Rodney Reed who had hurled the stone that had laid him senseless at the feet of Nora Norrington; and, upon further reflection, he believed that Reed had followed him, and that the villain must have furnished himself with a duplicate key to the office.

The throwing of the stone was the first act.

Entering the office, and suspending the key, was the second.

What would be the third?

After thus awakening suspicion against him, the scoundrel must know that any "crookedness" he might contemplate afterward would be very difficult to accomplish.

It indicated that Reed must be confident of his ability to carry out any criminal plot he might have formed, without any danger to himself; or else, that he meditated some desperate deed, and immediate flight afterward.

It was plain to Clarence that the infamous villain was infatuated with Nora, or he would not act as he had done. He would not have flung the stone, had he not been excited to the borders of madness by jealousy.

What further crime was it possible for the dastard to commit?

There seemed to Clarence to be but one.

He did not imagine for a moment that Reed would dare inflict personal harm upon his employer, or to commit such an atrocious act as the abduction of Nora. He did not entertain the idea that Rodney Reed was desperate enough to do such a thing.

But, it was apparent that he did meditate a crime; and that crime, Clarence felt must be robbery. He would rob the safe while Clarence had the keys, thus throwing the deed upon his head and shoulders.

This was terrible to think of!

Could it be possible?

It did not seem so, unless the miscreant had means by which he could force the safe, or blow it up. It was beyond his power to secure the combination.

Clarence made up his mind that he would reveal Reed's true character to his employer on the following day.

Having thus decided, he finished his copying, and then sat thinking over the startling occurrences of the evening, until he became justly infuriated.

He resolved to force Reed to either fight or fly—hence the warning which he wrote, to which we have before referred, and which was found on the desk afterward.

Poor Clarence!

Little dreamed he of the black cloud of disgrace and despair that was descending upon him; but it was to be revealed to him in all its gloom and terror—alas! too soon.

After writing the warning and securing the papers in his breast-pocket, Clarence gave one scrutinizing glance around the two apartments, as if he could not bring himself to believe that he was alone in the banking-house. He then extinguished the light and passed out into the street—an inebriated party of men at the door of a drinking-saloon shouting for him to come and join them, and addressing him as "Senor Temperance," thus proving that he was recognized.

Clarence Coleman paid no attention to the night brawlers, but strode along on the east side of the Plaza, toward the southern suburb of the city—on toward the most horrible scene, and to become involved in the most horrible network of disgrace and dishonor that could possibly be imagined.

On he went, through fields and amid mesquites, and into the dark shades of the pecans that bordered the beautiful banks of the San Antonio river. Thus the young man walked, his head bowed and his eyes fixed upon the ground at his feet, though he saw it not; for his brain was filled with a whirl of thoughts and imaginings of the possible crime Rodney Reed might commit to dishonor and disgrace him.

But Clarence Coleman was not one to long

permit his mind to be tortured by thoughts of such a contemptible coward.

Was he not a strong and fearless man?

Was he not an honest man, who need fear nothing from such a dastard?

And was he not blessed, as but few men on earth are, with the love of as pure and innocent a maiden as could be found on earth?

He paused a while, as he reached the spot where he had passed the last few blissful moments with Nora Norrington, and his face was a study.

His expression for a few moments was almost feminine, then hard, cold and revengeful it became as he thought of the cowardly assault that had laid him senseless at the feet of his darling, and causing her also to faint in terror.

Involuntarily the young man's hand sought his knife for an instant.

Little did he think that his bowie, in place of being in its sheath, was at that moment in the breast of his employer, and had caused the death of the father of her whom he loved more than life!

Clarence proceeded on, however, not wishing to keep Norman Norrington from his couch, should the old banker have remained up on his account. Through the garden he hastened, and sprang up the steps upon the rear veranda. He then walked lightly around to the front, where he had left his employer smoking, some hours previous.

He was not in the least surprised to find that Mr. Norrington was not in his chair; he, therefore, passed into the hall, and thence to the parlor. There, he at once detected the odor of chloroform, and was filled with apprehension.

But he passed on to the library.

The moon was now high in the heavens, and every object in the apartment was plainly revealed.

First, he saw Nora Norrington, seated in a chair, facing him, and sustained in it by a silken scarf, which was tied around her body.

Her head was bowed forward, her long hair partly veiling her face.

Her arms hung limp; her hands lying listlessly in her lap.

Her lips were almost colorless, and her eyes partly closed—her long lashes drooping downward.

Clarence Coleman gazed in astonishment; the color leaving his face, his mouth agape, and his blood chilling in his veins with a nameless horror.

At the first glance, he was the most startled man on earth; at the next, the most agonized. He realized that Nora was unconscious, that her appearance was unnatural, that something dreadful had happened!

The corpse of the banker was not visible, as the desk was between him and it.

The scent of chloroform was sickening.

By an effort, that was almost superhuman, the young man threw off the enervating emotions that held him as in a vise, and staggered forward; the word "Nora," in a gasping whisper, bursting from his lips.

But, as if all power of movement had been suddenly taken from him, Clarence Coleman became riveted in his tracks; his form bent forward, his eyes glassy and protruding from their sockets. For his gaze fell upon a horrible sight—the outstretched form of Norman Norrington, with the white, dead face upturned, and the silver-handled bowie projecting from his breast!

On the instant, Clarence recognized his own knife—ay, he could even read his name, the letters seeming to be magnified, and illumined by a hellish light—then, like the lightnings of the Mexique Gulf, thoughts tore through his seething brain.

He knew that he had been too late; that his rival, the dastardly Rodney Reed, was the assassin, and that the murderer had left proofs that might convict the innocent!

CHAPTER VII.

THE WARNING.

RED REED hastened from the house, through the gardens, finally gaining the timber, through the dark shades of which he rushed, at times gazing backward, with bated breath, every movement among the bushes caused by himself seeming to him the rapid approach of some vengeful pursuer.

Suddenly the thought occurred to him to brace his nerves with brandy. To his consternation, however, he found that he had not his flask with him.

The wretch halted.

Had he lost the liquor while rushing through the undergrowth?

He hoped, most sincerely, that this was the case; but he greatly feared that, in his excitement, he had left the flask in the very room in which he had committed his fearful crime!

Red Reed was appalled at this possibility.

After all his planning and plotting, and committing the deed he had long contemplated—leaving a guilty trail for Clarence Coleman—had he been such an idiot as to drop a clue that would almost inevitably point to himself? For the flask, he remembered, bore a particular and

well-known brand, besides having a label pasted upon it.

From having believed that it would be impossible for any living soul to show that he had been in the slightest manner, connected with the Norrington tragedy, Red Reed was now forced to the terrifying conclusion that he was far from being safe from suspicion. Yet, as he thought of the accumulated evidence against Clarence Coleman, he began to comfort himself with the thought that even the presence of his flask in the library might not have much weight after all.

But he must avoid observation, and the first thing necessary was a change of apparel.

This, however, he had prepared for.

He now bathed the tell-tale stains from his hands and face, arranged his hair, and then, pulling his hat low over his forehead, he stole out from the timber, keeping in the suburbs to the south of the town, and within the low mesquite trees. Thus he made his way to the San Pedro, or the Mexican portion of the Alamo City.

Passing in the rear of the line of *jacals*, Reed came to a small and much more miserable one than those fronting on the street.

Giving a series of peculiar little taps on the door of the hotel, the villain gazed impatiently around him.

"Who is there?" came in a gruff voice, in Spanish, from within.

A bird-like whistle was the reply.

"Bueno!" returned the man, and the door was quickly opened.

"The job is done, Pedro! I must change my clothes, and then you will go with me for the doubloons."

Thus spoke Red Reed, in the ear of the Greaser who admitted him.

"Bueno!" said the latter again, in evident pleasure; "we have waited long, Senor Reed. I am glad it is over. Did you have reason to wish I was with you?"

"I got along all right, Pedro. But, shut the door, and give us a light! Were you asleep?"

"No, senor; I never sleep at night. I am like the owl. I have a *siesta* when the sun shines the hottest."

A candle was soon lighted, and Red Reed began his toilet.

"You see I got badly spattered," he remarked.

"Then Senor Norrington is dead?"

"Dead as a door-nail! And the best of it is, Clarence Coleman's name is on the knife that I thrust in the old man's breast, and left in the wound. I have another strong proof against him. I knocked the fellow down with a rock, early in the evening, and bruised his head."

"I have put a bloody stone just like it, in the hand of the dead man. Coleman is to go to the house to-night, with papers. He will be the first, beyond a doubt, to discover the murder; and he will raise the alarm before he sees the evidence there is against himself. Do you understand, Pedro?"

"By St. Iago, Senor Reed, you are as cunning as an Apache! But you should have got no blood on your clothes. You will get used to it after awhile, however. You are new to the business."

"Yes; but I think I did pretty well, as a starter. There, now I'm fixed; but what shall we do with the clothes? We must leave a clean trail, you know."

"Pedro will attend to the clothes to-morrow, senor. No one will come in. They dare not."

"All right! I shall probably return with you. Who knows what may occur? But we must hasten. Are you ready?"

"Pedro is ready," was the reply.

Extinguishing the candle, the two men stole from the *jacal*, locking the door behind them.

It was now midnight, and but a few solitary pedestrians were to be seen on the streets of the western portion of the city.

But Red Reed and Pedro, the latter being a confessed cut-throat, kept on until clear of the *jacals*, when they struck into the mesquites until a favorable point was reached; then entering a deserted street, which led to the Main Plaza.

They walked rapidly, and soon stood on the Plaza's northeast corner.

Thus far, they had not met any one, and, to their relief, no one was now to be seen anywhere near them.

"Come on!" said Reed. "If the light is not burning in the office, we are all right."

To their further relief, they soon saw that there was no light in the bank.

Clarence Coleman, then, had left.

He had gone to the Norrington Mansion.

He would find his employer a corpse!

The city would soon be alarmed.

The guilty pair had no time for delay.

Thus reasoned Red Reed.

Quickly they glided to the door of the offices of Norman Norrington.

The Greaser drew his knife, in anticipation of possible trouble; but Reed bade him put up the weapon, for, even should Clarence be still there, he could make an excuse for his visit, having a perfect right in the office.

The door was unlocked, and both entered.

All was still and dark, as they had expected. Reaching beneath the lounge, where he had a short time before been hidden, Reed produced a dark-lantern.

"All right, Pedro!" he whispered; "now for the boodle. You see, Coleman carries the keys to-day, and I'm not supposed to know the combination. But I heard the fool mutter it while I was concealed here."

"This has been a night of work for me, I tell you, old boy! I am proud of my success. Now, for the safe. Ye gods! What's that?"

Reed had flashed the lantern upon Clarence Coleman's desk.

There lay a sheet of foolscap, upon which was written, in large letters:

"BEWARE!"

"Rodney Reed, your character has long been suspected by me. This very evening, you acted the spy on my movements, and in a cowardly manner felled me to the earth, in the presence of one, whose path you are not worthy to sweep! You have again acted the spy upon me, in this very office to-night."

"I know you are plotting to ruin me. You are a thief, as well as a coward, and are capable of any crime. But, beware! I will shoot you, as I would a poisonous snake, if you again cross my path."

"This will end to-morrow. Thank Heaven, you do not know the combination; for I believe you would rob the safe, and shift the guilt upon your inveterate foe,"

CLARENCE COLEMAN.

The face of Red Reed became ashen, and the paper nearly dropped from his hand.

He gazed wildly into the face of his yellow-skinned pard; then he hissed:

"By h—ll! I believe he has changed the combination. If he has, we are lost, and all that I have thus far accomplished goes for nothing. Besides, I see that my jig is up in this city. He'll shoot me, dead sure, if he gets the drop on me!"

The miscreant ran to the safe, but his hand trembled violently, as he fitted the key, and whispered off the combination.

A cry of joy and relief came from him, as the door of the safe flew open.

"Pedro, we are O. K.—we are rich! We'll roll in gold—do you hear me?—roll in gold! But we have no time to spare. Where is the bag?"

"Here, senor!" excitedly returned the Mexican; "but keep still, or we shall lose all. You are mad to waste time in this way!"

"You're right, Pedro; but you must haste at once with the boodle, to the *jacal*, and bury it. Then go to sleep over the spot, until I join you. We shall then levitate for a more healthy locality. Here we are!"

With great dexterity, the miscreant opened drawers, and jerked buckskin bags of heavy weight from the same; besides bundles of stocks, and other valuable papers. All of these, he cast into the sack which Pedro held open.

Everything of value was soon within it.

"Now Pedro," said Red Reed, "get up, and dust with the dust! Knife any man who halts you, or who manifests too much curiosity. You have a fortune in that bag."

"Come, I'll give you exit by the rear door. Pass through the dark alley, and head for the mesquites. You are not likely to meet any one, unless the alarm has been already sounded."

So saying, Reed pushed the Greaser, bending under the heavy sack, out into the darkness.

The villain then extinguished the light, and passed out, securing the door; leaving everything as he had found it, except the valuables in the safe, and the door of the same.

This last, being nearly closed, he thought he had locked, according to the same combination.

CHAPTER VIII.

LYNCH LAW FOR THE ASSASSIN.

WHO can imagine, or even approach in imagination, the agony of soul which Clarence Coleman suffered, when his gaze fell upon the murdered Norman Norrington, within whose mangled breast was his own bowie?

It seemed to the horrified young man that his brain must burst, and he himself fall dead at the feet of his recent employer—the father of her who sat there, bound to her chair, and unconscious of the fearful spectacle before her!

It was all too awful—almost beyond the conception of human brain!

From the face and breast of the corpse, the eyes of the young man were instinctively drawn once more to the bent form of Nora; and, as if his gaze instilled life into her frame, the form of the maiden suddenly straightened. And, as instantaneously appeared the recovery of her senses of sight, hearing, and comprehension.

Placed as she was, the first sight that caught her view, was the blood-stained corpse!

For a moment, her starting eyes were filled with horror unspeakable. She was hardly able, as yet, to determine whether it was reality, or the waking recollection of a fearful dream. Soon, however, the dread truth was realized; and, at the same instant, she recognized the knife that still protruded from her dead father's breast!

Then, from her colorless lips, came a long-drawn, piercing shriek; her very soul seeming to have vanished with the sound!

Clarence Coleman appeared more like a corpse himself than a living being.

The scene was one calculated to chill the blood of an observer.

The bitter cry of Nora Norrington sounding through the still night air alarmed the servants and two ranchoeros who were riding past on the down-river trail from the city.

Screams of alarm were heard, and the ranchoeros galloped up to the veranda. But the sounds and movements were unnoticed by Clarence.

He staggered forward and fell on his knees beside the corpse. Impatiently he tore the bandage from his wounded head and threw it, with his hat, through the window, and across the veranda.

Then he arose, his mind suddenly reverting to Nora, and put out his hands to raise the drooping head of the poor girl upward; but he drew them back quickly in horror, for they were spotted with her father's blood. Surely he could not touch the daughter with that upon his hands; and, as far as proof went, upon his soul as well!

At that moment into the parlor rushed the two ranchoeros.

"Hollo, the house!"

"What's up here?"

These exclamations from the new arrivals brought the servants rushing in also; but the ranchoeros paid no attention to them, for they had caught sight of Clarence and of Nora.

They sprang forward, revolvers in hand.

Upon perceiving the appearance of the man before them, they naturally judged that he had committed the deed of violence connected with the shriek that had so alarmed them, and they at once brought their pistols to bear upon his breast.

"No nonsense now!"

"Hands up, or down you go!"

Thus cried out the ranchoeros.

"Then, as they caught a sight of the corpse, with a knife-handle projecting from the breast, one yelled:

"Brackett, he's killed old man Norrington! Send one of the niggers to town for help. It's Coleman, the clerk—that's who it is!"

"He's desperate, and we may have to shoot him; which I'd hate to do, for his neck needs a lariat, if any one ever did!"

"By the Eternal! he's a tough one, Brown! Keep your eye peeled. Look at that young lady. He has tied her fast in the chair. Don't I want to pull a rope on him! I just banker to do it!"

As Brackett ended, he ran off among the terrified and howling servants, and seizing two negro men by the collars, he pushed them off the veranda before him, shouting:

"Run! Run as if the very devil was after you, and tell every one that your master has been murdered."

"Run to the Bull's Head and the Plaza House and raise the boys—quick, or the murderer may escape us!"

With faces like ashes, the two negroes rushed wildly and without replying toward the city, glad enough to get away from the horrors behind them.

Brackett then returned hastily to the library, where he found Brown covering the supposed murderer with his revolver.

Clarence Coleman stood upright, pale as death, and with his arms folded.

"Then he don't show fight?" said Brackett, as he entered. "By thunder, Clarence Coleman, I didn't think you capable of such a deed!"

"Gentlemen," said the young man, speaking hoarsely, "I swear to you that I had nothing to do with this horrible crime! I see that the proofs are strong against me, but for all that, I tell you I never lifted my hand against Norman Norrington!"

"All that kind of talk is useless," said Brown, in a decided manner, and with evident contempt and detestation. "Your name is engraved on that knife in the dead man's breast. He holds in his death-grip a stone, with which he struck you on the head in defending himself. Besides, don't we find you here with blood upon your hands, the only man awake upon the premises?"

"To make your crime more infernal still, you have bound the senseless daughter of your victim—who was probably a witness to your cowardly deed—beside the corpse!"

"I warn you, Coleman, that you have but a few minutes to live. Such crimes as yours must be attended to by Judge Lynch!"

When the ranchoero alluded to the stone in the hand of the murdered man, Clarence fixed his eyes upon the same, which he had not noticed previously, and not until then was all doubt removed from his mind in regard to the author of the tragedy.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I here accuse Rodney Reed as the murderer of his and my employer. He concealed himself in the bushes on the river-bank last evening, and felled me senseless with a stone."

"I see now that he stole my knife; and after murdering Mr. Norrington with the weapon, he has placed the stone in the dying man's hand to increase the evidence against me. I have been

copying in the office to-night, at the request of my employer, and it was when I brought the papers to him, that he might give them to Mr. Montgomery early in the morning, that I made the dreadful discovery which you see.

"Don't you smell chloroform? The miscreant administered the drug to the poor girl, and then placed her where she is. You will find no chloroform about me; and I can prove, by the evidence of Miss Norrington herself, that Rodney Reed struck me senseless, as I have just told you, causing this wound upon my head."

"I should be greatly relieved, could I believe your story, Coleman," said Brackett; "for I do hate to think that such a man as you have always appeared to be, should be so infamous a scoundrel; but the evidence is too strong. Besides, you are the perfect picture of guilt."

Clarence was silent for a moment.

Then, glancing at Nora, he said:

"For mercy's sake gentlemen, have Miss Norrington removed from this horrible room! If she should recover, this would be the death of her."

"That's a game of his," said Brackett, "to get us to move the young lady, and in that way give him a chance to escape. Keep your position, Brown! Here,"—calling to the servants—"take your mistress to her own room, instantly! You seem frightened out of your senses, and no wonder."

Having released Nora, and given her in charge to the negro woman, Brown returned to the assistance of his companion; Clarence having kept his gaze upon the idol of his heart, while she was within view.

Would he ever see her again?

Never! Came the answer, in his own thoughts.

Could it be that Nora Norrington believed him to be the murderer of her father?

Such were some of the thoughts that came into the young man's mind.

Then were heard the mad shouts and yells of a mob of men, as they rushed down the river, coming from the city.

A groan of agony and despair came from the lips of Clarence Coleman.

He knew that there was no mercy in that crowd—knew that he was doomed to die an ignominious death!

Should he die thus, knowing that he was the victim of the dastardly assassin, Rodney Reed?

Should he tamely submit to have a rope tied around his neck, and be hanged like a dog—he, who had never wronged any man?

Should such a miscreant as Reed escape, to darken further the life of Nora Norrington, for whom, doubtless, the crime had been committed?

This last thought was maddening, and caused him to brace himself for what was before him. It nerved his strong frame to the strength of several men, giving him a determination to fight for his life; and to vindicate the justice of Heaven, by bringing the real assassin to retribution—to death by the rope—that death which now stared him in the face.

All this came to him in an instant, as the fierce and vengeful yells, and the cries for blood, came from the mad mob, made up of the worst element of the Alamo City, and filled the night air.

All respectable people had long been in their beds, unless obliged to be up through the illness of others; and those who rushed toward the Norrington Mansion, were the night frequenters of the all-night bars of San Antonio.

"No mercy from that mob!"

Such was the soliloquy of Clarence Coleman, as he gathered his strength to battle for life, that he might have time and opportunity to prove his innocence, and to bring the fiend in man's shape to the death his crime merited.

He sprang forward like an enraged panther, clutching the revolver of Brackett by the barrel. Wrenching the weapon free, he felled the astonished ranchero senseless beside the corpse of Norman Norrington, and then, quick as thought, another blow was delivered, knocking Brown senseless also.

Thrusting the pistol of Brown into his belt, and holding Brackett's with his own Colt's army "six" in his left hand, Clarence drew his bowie from the breast of the corpse, and raising the blade on high, cried out:

"Here, over the murdered body of my respected employer, the father of the maiden whom I love more than life, I swear that this blade—my bowie blade, used by the murderer to place his crime at my door—shall be buried in the heart of the assassin, Rodney Reed! Heaven help me to keep my oath!"

In derisive answer and mockery, as it appeared, came the cry for his blood, from the mob now close at hand.

CHAPTER IX.

GONE FROM THEIR GAZE.

THRUSTING the knife, still freshly stained with the blood of Norman Norrington, into its sheath, Clarence Coleman, with a cocked revolver in each hand, darted into the parlor, and thence up the stairs.

The negroes had run, like frightened sheep, when they saw the young man knock the rancheroes down with the pistol.

Clarence knew not that there would be ever again an opportunity for him to see Nora.

Like a madman he mounted the stairs.

He knew the location of the young girl's apartments, and into it he sprang, crying out to the servants:

"Don't be afraid of me! You know that I did not kill your master. Tell Miss Nora, that I have come to bid her farewell!"

"Tell her, that Rodney Reed murdered her father—that he stole my knife to do it with, and thus throw suspicion upon me! Tell her, I shall live but for her, and for revenge."

"I'll prove my innocence, and bring Reed to the rope. I swear it, by my love for Nora, and my hopes of Heaven! Your young mistress is my promised wife."

"Oh, my darling, this is more than I can bear! But, I will bear it. I'll keep my oath, and will not falter for a moment in the performance of it."

The last sentences were spoken, as he folded the still senseless maiden in his arms, and pressed his lips upon her brow.

"Heaven strengthen you, Nora Norrington, to bear the terrible cross that has been thrust upon you! Farewell, my darling, my life!"

"Run, Mars' Coleman! Run! Day is comin' arter yer, jist a-kinin'. I knows yer didn't kill ole mars'!"

Thus cried out the old black cook, pushing Clarence from the chamber, after he had placed Nora back upon her pillow.

But Clarence had lingered too long.

Up the stairs dashed the mad mob, doubly furious from what they had witnessed in the library.

"Back, I tell you! Don't crowd an innocent and desperate man. Seek Rodney Reed for your victim. He is the assassin!"

With these words, yelled in defiance, the young man dashed through a side window, out on the roof of the veranda, ran along the same to the front of the dwelling, and then sprang to the ground alongside of the horses of Brown and Brackett, the rancheroes.

One of these he mounted, the animal, at his wild yell, darting at terrific speed through the mequites; into, and down the river road, toward Mission San Jose.

The mad mob, with howls of baffled rage, ran back, down the stairway, and out upon the veranda; just in time to see Clarence Coleman, their intended victim, speeding off down the river. They dashed madly, here and there, shouting for horses, to go in pursuit; but, before the animals of the old banker were equipped, the fugitive had a fair start, with a good chance to evade his pursuers.

One there was, however, in that crowd of determined rancheroes, who, without seeming to do so, hindered their departure as much as was possible, without betraying his object.

This man was no other than Rodney Reed, the assassin, who feared, if Clarence should be caught, and the lynchers gave him sufficient time, he would so impress them by his assertions of innocence, as to put their suspicions on the right trail.

Red Reed had met one of the negroes, who had been sent to arouse the citizens, when he was on his way to his club-room; and, realizing that it would be of no benefit to him then to join his card-playing companions, he ran back to the bar-rooms, making himself conspicuous by his yelling:

"Rally, men, and avenge Norman Norrington! Clarence Coleman has murdered the old banker!"

But, though the miscreant wished the innocent man to escape for the present, not for an instant did he lose sight of the means for Coleman's being made way with, by tools whom he had already selected, and upon whom he could depend. Not only so, but he deemed it necessary for his safety, that Clarence should be captured before he could have an opportunity of communicating with Nora Norrington.

To Reed's great relief, he perceived three Mexicans in the yelling crowd, whom he knew to be associates of Pedro Pernaes, the cut-throat who was in his employ. With these men he exchanged signals, and gave them directions, unnoticed by others, offering them five hundred dollars each to hasten after the fugitive, and secure him, unknown to the others.

The three Grasers were directed to seek the *jagal* of Pedro Pernaes at once, as he could furnish them with horses, and whatever else they needed.

After their departure, Red Reed felt comparatively secure.

The mob had been so boisterous, that but few of the words yelled by Clarence, as he made his escape, had been heard; and the excited men paid no attention to Reed, probably not having caught his name.

After the mounted lynchers had left, the others became somewhat calmed. They proceeded to the room where the corpse lay, and inspected everything connected with the assassination.

The one fear now, of Rodney Reed, was in

connection with Brown and Brackett, the rancheroes.

He feared that, in some way, Clarence Coleman might have excited the suspicions of these two men against himself; by explaining his own presence in the house, and accusing him, Reed, of the murder.

In fact, the assassin was beginning to feel the tortures of his guilty conscience, strange though it must seem; for the possession of such an inward monitor seemed to be a thing impossible with such a monster.

He realized that he would, now, be in constant torture.

He feared to hear any one speak, lest the words might tend to accuse him of the crime; or even, that some one might suggest the possibility of Coleman being innocent.

One thing favorable to the latter, as Rodney Reed well knew, was the fact that Clarence had always been respected greatly, as an honorable and honest man, who was in no way given to dissipation—not ever having been known to drink, or play at cards.

Another thing greatly worried Reed, which was the flask of brandy, of which we have before spoken, and which he felt had probably been left by him in the room of the murder; and, when he now entered it, he cast keen glances around the apartment, in an endeavor to discover it, and steal it away—thus removing a great load from his mind, in that connection.

But he could see nothing of it, and finally came to the conclusion that he must have dropped it from his pocket, while threading the undergrowth, up through the river-bottom, after escaping from the scene of the murder.

But even if this were true, it must be found by him, and destroyed, before he could have any peace of mind.

When Brown and Brackett were brought back to consciousness, they remained for some time in a semi-dazed state; for Coleman had dealt, to each of them, a terrific blow.

Soon, however, they both recovered sufficiently to realize the near past; and they sat, and gazed at the corpse of Norman Norrington.

Their heads were bruised and bleeding, and they were furious when they learned of the escape of the assassin; or, rather, the man whom they believed to be the old banker's murderer.

As a matter of course they were plying with numerous questions by such of the mob as had remained in and about the house.

Upon perceiving that the knife was gone from the breast of the murdered man, they became more confident of the guilt of Coleman than before; indeed, they had not the slightest doubt as to his being the assassin, and they mentioned the fact that they could both swear that the bowie—which had been the weapon used by the murderer—belonged to Clarence Coleman; in fact, that the name of the young man was plainly engraved upon it.

They drew attention also to the stone with the stains of blood upon it, which was clutched in the death-grip of the old banker, explaining that Norrington had evidently striven to defend himself with this missile and that he had struck Coleman, causing a wound upon the head of the latter which had bled profusely.

They also mentioned the circumstance of the hands of the accused being stained with blood, and that they were satisfied he was the assassin; although, they admitted he had protested in the most solemn way his innocence and avowed his determination to bring the guilty man to the gallows.

They stated as well that Clarence Coleman had solemnly affirmed that Rodney Reed was the murderer of their employer; but then, it was perfectly natural that he should accuse some one, and he had fixed upon his fellow-clerk for that purpose.

But, fortunately for Reed, it appeared that he had been in the city at the time the dastardly deed was committed, so every man in the crowd laughed to scorn the accusation, and the miscreant breathed freely for the time.

Consequently there was no doubt in the mind of any as to the guilt of the unfortunate young man, and all hoped most sincerely that he would be captured.

The dead banker was left as he lay, to await the action of the coroner in the morning, a number of the disappointed lynchers remaining on guard, and a medical man having been summoned to attend to Miss Norrington.

Red Reed, as soon as he could steal away, lost no time in doing so, repairing in great haste to the *jagal* of his worthy pard, Pedro Pernaes.

CHAPTER X.

THE NEMESIS.

A STONE'S throw in distance from the sight of the old Cock Pit, and between the same and the Military Plaza, in San Antonio, was a long, one-storied *adobe* building. Its walls projected above the flat roof some two and a half feet; but were pierced on a level with the roof, at regular intervals, to allow water-spouts to be thrust out. These threw off a stream of water beyond the narrow sidewalk.

Inside, the large rooms, which extended the breadth of this building, were furnished in a

primitive manner; but neatness and good taste were noticeable on every side.

Both house and furniture indicated that the dwellers were of the better class of Mexicans.

Let us enter.

Seated beside a white-spread couch, is a beautiful woman, who is watching the slumbers of an infant with maternal solicitude. It is the same evening on which took place the interview between Clarence and Nora, near the river.

It is a girlish-looking, but fully developed female that we see before us; and her appearance and surroundings show her to be beyond her class in many ways.

A book lies open near her, and on the fly-leaf is written in a masculine hand,

"NITA NICHOLS."

"THE GIFT OF RODNEY REED."

Nita Nichols is the name of the young woman—a name which denotes the truth; that is, that the one who bears it is the child of an American father and a Mexican mother.

At times the soft and maternal expression upon the young mother's face would change suddenly, her lovely features putting on the look of a fury, an expression not unusual among the daughters of the land of the Montezumas.

It was plain to see that Nita Nichols had good cause for anger, for she was one who had been trained to keep her passions under control.

Nita had enjoyed the advantages of the excellent schools of the Alamo City, and spoke English as fluently as she did Spanish!

She had been infatuated, deceived and disgraced by none other than Rodney Reed—degraded with the promise of marriage, which had, from time to time been deferred, under various pretexts. Her patience was at length exhausted, and she had that day vowed that the father of her child should attend her to the *padre*, and give the little one a name, or die by her hand!

And she was the one to keep her oath.

In the adjoining apartment was a middle-aged woman, with traces of fading beauty.

This was the mother of Nita.

The husband and father had long been dead.

Juanita Nichols felt the disgrace of her position much more than would a pure-blooded Mexican girl of the same station in life, and that, for the reason that she had associated a great deal with Americans.

The villain, who really feared the girl whom he had so shamefully wronged, had always soothed her anger by well-chosen words, asserting that he would soon be in a position financially not only to make her his wife but to purchase an elegant and even princely home for herself and her widowed mother.

But so many flattering stories had the scoundrel poured into her ears, which had proved but as the winds that blew, that Nita gave the last no more credit than she now did the first.

Being naturally of a very passionate and jealous disposition, she had formed a suspicion that her seducer had some other maiden in view as a prospective wife.

Her love, in fact, was now fast changing to hate, and had it not been for the sake of her child, she would not have entertained any longer the thought of linking her life to such a villain. As it was, she had not the slightest intention of living with Rodney Reed after the ceremony was performed.

At the time we introduce Nita Nichols, she had satisfied herself that Reed had some scheme of villainy on foot, after the consummation of which she believed his intention was to leave the city forever. Her mind had become greatly agitated upon seeing him enter the mansion of Norman Norrington, on the veranda of which sat a beautiful young lady.

After this discovery she had procured a suit of male attire, and disguised in it, had played the spy upon her recreant lover, following him, but never except when the shadows of night had enveloped the earth.

Nita had found out but little, however, in connection with Reed's plottings, but she had ascertained that he had closely associated himself with Pedro Pinales, whom she knew to be a lawless Mexican, who had a particularly bad reputation. Indeed, Pedro was the acknowledged leader of a party of *ladrones*, who frequented San Antonio by night and had a rendezvous at the most miserable locality on the San Pedro in the western part of the city.

Upon mentioning this to her mother, Nita was delighted to learn that Pinales was an escaped *peon* from the estate of her own grandparents on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande.

A consultation between mother and daughter resulted in the latter's deciding to seek out Pedro, and gain from him all the information possible in regard to Rodney Reed.

Nita was now waiting for the evening shades, in order that she might with more safety seek the *jacal* of Pedro Pinales.

Not long had she to wait.

She attired herself in the costume mentioned, twisting her abundant hair compactly on the top of her head and then covering it with the

sombrero, further disguising herself by throwing a *serape* of brilliant colors over her shapely shoulders.

Leaving her sleeping babe and her anxious mother, who had neither the will nor character to control her daughter in the least, Nita lighted a shuck cigarette and, leaving her home, proceeded down the street south, and then turned toward the San Pedro Creek.

She passed over the little stream, and when not observed, down along the bank of the same beneath the willows.

By this time, it was dark in the thick shade of the trees, but beyond, it was lit up by the moon. All was dark, too, inside the miserable *jacal* which she sought; but Nita believed that the Mexican was within, and she therefore continued her course very cautiously.

She climbed a tree, and ensconced herself among the branches directly over the thatched roof of the little *jacal*.

For a long time, the patient young woman remained in hiding, bearing no sound within; when, suddenly her attention was attracted by the stealthy approach of some one.

Soon, she recognized in the man who neared the hovel, her villainous betrayer.

She felt that her coming had been most opportune.

She was positive she would now be able to gain much information of the character that she sought.

Nita heard plainly, so near was she, the peculiar taps upon the door; and she impressed the signal upon her mind.

She heard, too, the challenge of Pedro, and the opening and shutting of the door; and she stole down from the tree, and crouched by the corner of the *jacal*, placing her ear to the space between two of the upright pickets, which formed its sides.

Thus posted, she heard every word that passed between Reed and Pinales.

She knew that the former had murdered Norman Norrington!

She also heard all in connection with the proposed robbery of the safe, and the story of Reed's hurling the stone at Clarence Coleman.

Having heard previously of the suspected intimacy between young Coleman and the banker's daughter, Nita was not long in deciding, that the enmity of her seducer against his fellow clerk was caused by the jealousy of the former. He had now murdered his employer, for the purpose of removing him from his path; but, principally, that he might fasten the guilt of the crime upon Clarence. The next step would be, to marry Nora Norrington, or else add her to the list of his victims.

Nita was horrified.

Still, she was even more resolute than before, in her purpose.

She still remained concealed in the tree; regaining her position when the two miscreants left the *jacal*. Pedro, she knew, would soon return with the proceeds of the projected robbery.

If she could but secure this ill-gotten booty, Nita Nichols felt that it would go far toward the accomplishment of her revenge; and, could she also get possession of the blood-stained clothing of the assassin, she would have proofs indisputable of Rodney Reed's guilt.

Then, too, when the villain would no longer have the means wherewith to reward his tools, they would be ready to turn against him.

Therefore it was, that Nita, in her disguise, awaited the return of Pedro; but a portion of her time was well occupied, for she succeeded in removing with her dagger, from the opposite corner to that in which the two men had been during the changing of Reed's apparel, a portion of the dry reed thatch. Through the space thus made she was enabled to descend into the *jacal*.

To conceal this opening, the cunning spy procured a piece of an old cowhide, which she perceived lying beneath the tree, with which she covered over the opening; but, leaving it in such a manner that it could be readily pulled from the aperture.

She was much excited, upon the return of Pedro Pinales, with evidently a heavy burden upon his shoulder; for she feared the Greaser would search about his hovel for any lurker, having such good cause to be guarded against robbers, the booty being now in his possession.

Yet, dangerous as was her position, Nita again sprung to the ground, and listened; being resolved to ascertain, by the movements of Pedro, in what portion of the hut he had secreted the plunder.

She had heard Reed tell his confederate, that a large fortune would be secured from the safe of the old banker; and she fully understood the importance of her remaining at her post.

But the consternation of the young woman may be imagined, when she perceived three ruffianly-looking Mexicans, rushing toward the *jacal* and her place of concealment. Although it was absurd to suppose that her presence was known, yet she trembled for a moment; but soon she braced herself, and drew her dagger, awaiting, with bated breath, the events that were to follow.

More determined, if possible, was she than

ever; even resolving to risk her life, if need be, before abandoning her purpose.

Much relieved, but still greatly mystified, was Nita, at that which followed.

The Greasers, as they came up, gave utterance to peculiar whistles, which caused Pedro to open the door of the *jacal*, and rush out, revolver in hand, beneath the very tree in which Nita was concealed.

In a hasty manner and voice, one of the men explained the situation.

They wanted horses and money, as they were to start in pursuit of Clarence Coleman, who had escaped the lynchers.

Red Reed was at the Norrington Mansion, with the mob; and all would be lost, if Coleman got away scot free.

Pedro, at once, ordered each of the Greasers to take a saddle and bridle; passing them, hurriedly, a handful of gold. He then locked the door, and bidding them follow him, they departed in haste.

CHAPTER XI.

NO FURY LIKE A WOMAN SCORNED.

NITA NICHOLS was nearly wild with excitement, after hearing the words of the trio of Mexicans.

She knew that Pedro had gone with them to procure the required horses, and that he was liable to return in a very few minutes.

There was not a moment to spare.

Her life would be in danger while she remained in the hovel, yet the heroic and determined girl did not hesitate. Indeed, she descended the tree at once, and climbing another, dropped from the branches upon the thatched roof.

To her great joy, she saw that a candle was burning behind the screen of hides in the corner, where Rodney Reed had changed his attire.

She sprang down, and ran toward it.

Pedro, in the haste and excitement, caused by the arrival of his three confederates, who had been totally unexpected, had left the candle burning, by mistake. He had also left the sack, containing the proceeds of the robbery, plainly in view.

The first examination made by Nita, revealed the bundle of bloody clothing. With a shudder, she clutched it, and running back, pushed it up through the aperture upon the roof.

Then, with rapid movements, she grasped bundles of papers, and small bags of gold, hurling them out in the same manner.

In a very short time, the treasure was all removed; and then, almost instantly the daring young woman was upon the roof, beside the spoils that she had taken. The next instant, she and they were in the shade of the willows.

Already she had formed a plan in regard to the bulk of the gold, which she knew was too heavy to be carried away. One after another, she pressed the bags beneath the soft mud of the San Pedro, near to the bank; and the current washed over, leaving nothing to show that it had been disturbed.

Retaining but one of the bags, which she attached to her belt, Nita took the bundle of clothes, and the packages of papers, on her left arm; and, with her dagger in her right hand, her *serape* hiding all from view, she made ready to start.

At that very moment, she beheld the form of Pedro Pinales, stealing toward the *jacal*; and she darted south, along the bank of the San Pedro.

After a time, she halted; but there were no sounds of pursuit. She now felt safe, and sure of success in her scheme.

Nita Nichols had often seen, and she had heard much of Clarence Coleman; and she knew that he was one, who had the respect and esteem of all. Too late, the poor girl had learned to distinguish between true and false manhood.

She had moments, when she could not forgive herself—when she looked back, with a feeling that she must have been insane, to have ever put confidence in such a villain as Reed.

Yet, she had sworn, that the father of her nameless boy should never wed another while she lived; and more, that she would yet bury her dagger in his heart! But, while the wretch lived, she would torture him.

This very night, she had been almost miraculously favored, toward the accomplishment of her oath, and it gave Nita great joy, to picture to herself the fury of Rodney Reed, when he found that the wealth, for which he had risked so much, had already been wrested from him.

She believed that, when Pedro informed Reed, that the gold, which they had stolen, had been stolen from them, the foiled miscreant would charge his accomplice with the deed, and would strive to kill him.

Such were the thoughts, that flashed through the mind of Nita, as she sped homeward.

"*Madre de Dios!*" exclaimed her mother, as she dashed in, through the rear door, and threw the packages which she carried, to the floor; then whirling about, and barring the door. This done, the girl stood with her back against the same, panting, and with flushed face and blazing eyes.

"Don't say a word, mother!" she exclaimed, in a hushed voice, and with difficulty, for she was nearly prostrated with fatigue; "wait un-

til I regain my breath, and composure. But, first, hide those things, and quickly!"

Nita, however, did not remain leaning against the door until she felt more natural.

A thought had suddenly struck her, which caused her to hasten, and change her attire for her usual costume. She reasoned that, very possibly, Red Reed, upon ascertaining that the treasure was gone, might connect her with the theft; and hasten to investigate matters.

Should he arrive while she was in male attire, he would decide that she was the thief.

Resuming her ordinary apparel with great haste, Nita then secreted the bundles of notes, and the tell-tale clothing, in an excavation beneath her couch; which was a place that had long been used by her mother and herself, for the reception of their money and valuables—quite a snug sum having been left, by the deceased American, to his wife and daughter.

This secret receptacle was covered with a thin, flat stone, over which was spread a cow-hide.

Not until all this had been done, did Nita feel safe, and her excitement abate. She then kissed her still sleeping child, and bade her mother take a seat beside her.

Mrs. Nichols had been greatly alarmed by the strange and unaccountable actions of her daughter, and much concerned at her unusually long absence. She had remained, standing and gazing at Nita, ever since the latter had come in.

The daughter explained the cause of her strange conduct and long absence, at once, and in a low tone; relating all the circumstances connected with her visit to the San Pedro, the original object of which had been so different.

This, the mother remembered, had been, in order that Nita might have an audience with Pedro Pernaes, the escaped *peon*; and endeavor to prevail upon him, to reveal all he knew of Rodney Reed. But it had proved the means of the determined young woman's gaining much knowledge in regard to the miscreant, beyond the worst that she had imagined; besides depriving him of a fortune, and gaining a hold upon him, which placed the life of her betrayer in her hands!

Mrs. Nichols was dumfounded, and greatly terrified as well, for she feared that Red Reed would in some manner find out all about her daughter's doings; and since he had not hesitated to murder Norman Norrington, the wealthy banker, would have few scruples in putting them all out of the way, in revenge and to hide his former crimes.

He had proved himself capable of any crime, by assassinating his employer; and not only that, but leaving proofs that would cause another, and an innocent man, to be thought the murderer—doubtless, too, the robber of the office of the murdered man!

It was terrible to think of!

It was really too much for poor Mrs. Nichols to bear with any degree of composure.

She was astonished at the strength of will and the reckless daring of her daughter in having accomplished with safety that which the bare thought of caused her to shudder with terror.

What was to be the end of it all?

But the poor woman became somewhat quieted when she was forced to agree with her daughter that she had been chosen to right a great wrong.

Then, too, she could not help seeing that the girl had been wonderfully protected through it all, and that she had, also, while getting evidence that would clear the innocent, been avenging herself upon the unprincipled dastard who had blighted her young life.

As for Nita, after she had recovered from her excitement, and could hear no indications of any one prowling around her home, she became more resolved, more defiant and more vengeful than ever, encouraged by the consciousness that she was battling for the right, and to bring to justice one of the vilest and most cowardly of men.

She had no longer any desire to compel Rodney Reed to keep his vows.

She cared not to have her child bear the name of an assassin.

Better far that the little one should bear its mother's name, and the disgrace for which it was in no way responsible, than to have a legal right to that of a robber, a murderer, a miscreant the most dastardly that could curse the earth.

No, that was one wrong which Nita Nichols would not seek to right.

Mother and daughter sat, with their arms about each other, for fully an hour—they, at length, deciding that it would be safer to bury the bundle and packages, of whose value they were ignorant, in the back yard. And as there was no time like the present, they, after reconnoitering the vicinity, thus disposed of it—disposed of, as they thought, everything connected with Nita's visit to the San Pedro.

Mrs. Nichols in vain endeavored to dissuade her daughter from all thought of returning on the following night to the scene of her late adventure for the gold that she had hidden in the mud.

The girl argued that, after the robbers had as-

certained that the money and papers were gone and also the bloody clothing, they would not only be infuriated to frenzy, but terrified as well, from the fact that they could have no knowledge of the party or parties who had gained possession of them.

The garments could be easily identified as belonging to Red Reed, and neither the assassin nor his accomplice would dare remain longer at the *jacal* for fear of being connected with the murder and robbery.

Very reasonable were these conclusions.

They showed that Nita was capable of carrying out her plans through a previous careful consideration of the manner in which she should proceed.

Brave, determined and revengeful as was the wronged girl, she was a dangerous foe for the man, who had sought to tread her under his feet, to encounter.

CHAPTER XII.

BREAKING IT GENTLY.

PEDRO PERNALES, contrary to the belief of Nita Nichols, had not the slightest suspicion that any human being would dare enter his hovel.

Indeed, there were none except Mexicans residing in that portion of the city, and they were the last to be suspected of such a thing, for they knew Pedro's desperate character.

He returned hastily, however, for he recollected that he had left the candle burning, and it might be accidentally overturned and set the hovel on fire.

When he saw that all was apparently in the same condition in which he had left it, he began to ponder over the latest development in the case. It began to look as though Reed thought himself liable to be arrested for the murder if Coleman escaped, and thus had a chance to send some written testimony to the town officials.

Pedro thought the capture of Coleman very uncertain; and, if so, his own position was dubious.

He began to think it best that he should take care of "number one."

He had now in his possession a large fortune, which he could easily appropriate, and then fly to Mexico, living the remainder of his life in luxury and elegance.

This possibility was very enticing—indeed, the Greaser felt that the one grand opportunity of his life was within his grasp. Never again would it be in his power to appropriate such a vast sum.

Was he not entitled, in any event, to one-half of the plunder?

Thus thought Pedro, and he decided that San Antonio was not a healthy town to abide in, and he would therefore cross the Rio Grande.

Having arrived at this conclusion, he began packing up his worldly possessions. But, the most astounding and infuriating discovery of his whole life awaited him. The instant he stepped behind the cow-hide screen he saw the open chest; the next, the sack that had contained the treasure, flat, and seemingly empty!

At once the Mexican halted.

He stood staring, his mouth agape.

Then, with a terrible oath, he kicked the bag, as though he could not believe his own senses.

Yes, it was empty.

The gold was gone!

Reed, the murderer, was gone also, and that bundle of clothing would prove Coleman innocent.

This was terrible!

The lips of the Greaser curled away, in a beast-like manner, from the white and gleaming teeth, and he clutched his *cuchillo*, and cut the empty air insanely, all the time rattling off deep, dread curses.

Soon, however, this changed to superstitious terror; and he gazed around the hut, as if expecting to see some awful shape, holding on to the banker's gold and the bloody bundle!

Next, a glow above his head drew the wretch's attention, and then all was plain to him.

His oaths now increased in number, and in terrible meaning.

There had been a spy upon him and Red Reed, and fortune had favored the skulker. In his brief absence the gold, stocks, and clothing had been taken.

Instantly it occurred to Pedro, that Reed would suspect him of having removed the treasure, and the clothing also—that, through the latter, he might have a hold upon him. His brain was now in a whirl. He must, in some manner, gain time to form some plan of action in the matter.

The fury of Reed would, undoubtedly, be terrible.

On the impulse of the moment, it was impossible to say what the foiled villain might not do.

Thus the Mexican reflected, and although he did not fear Reed, he did not wish to kill him, or to create any disturbance, situated as he now was. Had he funds in plenty, as he had just now hoped and believed, he would not have hesitated.

In that case, he would have plunged his knife

into the heart of Red Reed, when the latter appeared, and then fled toward the Rio Grande.

But there was no time to be wasted, and Pedro's plan for immediate action was quickly made.

He secured the door of the hovel, after having extinguished the candle, and then rushed at once toward the Norrington Mansion, by the same roundabout route that the three Mexicans had taken; reasoning that Red Reed would, at the first opportunity, start for the *jacal*, and by way of the mesquites, beyond the outer line of the town.

Not half the distance was passed, when the two confederates met.

The pair were greatly frightened.

"*Caramba!*" exclaimed the Greaser.

"In the name of Satan, where are you headed for? What's up? Speak, man!"

"Come, Senor Reed, and quickly!" returned Pedro, grasping him by the arm; "there is danger at the *jacal*. Some one followed you from the Casa Norrington. There were fully half-a-dozen Texanos in the willows when I stole away just now. Come!"

"You're crazy!" was the reply of Reed, tearing himself loose from the grasp of the Mexican; "I know that my movements were not observed. Don't dare tell me you have made a botch of this biz. I'll have your heart's blood, if anything has gone wrong!"

"But, there; don't mind my words, Pedro! I know you have acted with discretion. But, it is strange there should be men around the *jacal*."

"We must steal back and remove the gold. Yes, and—by all the fiends!—those infernal clothes are there. You must be crazy, indeed, to leave those proofs of my connection with the murder, even for a moment, in the *jacal*! What does the gold amount to in comparison? It would do me no good after I had been strung up!"

"Senor Reed, the clothes will never be seen again. I buried the bundle in the mud of the San Pedro."

The Mexican, having started by lying, found he had to continue in that line. Indeed, he would have sworn to anything that would keep Reed from going near the hovel.

"Good boy, Pedro! Thank you for that much. But we must have the gold now. We must take it down the river, and secrete it in the ruins of one of the old Missions. You see, we may be forced to fly at any moment."

"Coleman accused me of the murder. He had many friends, and the cuss ain't captured yet, by a jugful. Let us go back for the gold!"

"Senor Reed can go," said the Greaser, with evident terror and determination, "but Pedro thinks more of his life than of gold. They will shoot us. Let us wait until yon cloud hides the moon."

Rodney Reed saw that he could not influence the Mexican to return; so he threw himself upon the sword, not caring to proceed alone. He was suffering great tortures, for he knew he was standing on the verge of a precipice.

Clarence Coleman knew nothing of the robbery, and, should he be captured by those of the lynchers who had gone in pursuit, there would be no evidence of it to be found about his person. This would direct suspicion toward himself, although he was supposed to have had neither key nor combination.

As this last thought burst upon him, the assassin sprung to his feet and thrust his hands into his pockets, one after the other.

"Hell and furies, Pedro!" he exclaimed, "I have lost the key to the safe, or else, in the hurry and excitement, I must have left it in the lock! Curse me if I know which end my head is on!"

"Devil take the luck! I thought everything had been planned and executed to run so smoothly as to defy detection; but my luck changed from the moment I emptied that safe, I do believe. I declare I'm all mixed up now, and I don't know which way to turn, or what to do!"

"Keep still, and think, Senor Reed! If you rush matters, you are lost."

Pedro was satisfied that all was lost, as it was; for the gold was all he cared for, and his head was busy in planning how to recover it. He believed that, by daylight the trail of those who had carried it away could be discovered. The soft soil of the San Pedro would betray their footprints, and possibly some clew might be found that would lead to success.

However, the Greaser had little confidence, through fear or otherwise, in being to prevent his confederate from going to the *jacal*. Reed, it was evident, would not rest short of it. But he had gained one point.

It was the one at which he had aimed, from the moment that he set out from his hut.

He had succeeded in delaying Reed; and he could pretend, later on, that the gold had been taken while they lingered.

Having accomplished this much, and delayed a sufficient time, to allow the *jacal* to be entered and robbed—supposing there to be any one lurking around it with that purpose.—Pedro assumed as much indignation as Red Reed had

done at the first; swearing that he was not going to be defrauded of his share of the treasure.

"Come on, Senor Reed!" he now called out, in a most determined tone; "we will have the gold, or die fighting for it. Follow Pedro—gold, or blood!"

Flourishing his glittering knife in the air, the Mexican rushed toward the San Pedro.

But, he was very particular not to run so fast as to prevent Reed from keeping up with him; and the latter, as they neared the hovel, became much less eager to proceed. His face was pale, and his manner apprehensive.

Upon reaching a point from which they could gain a view of the *jacal*, the two men peered toward it.

Now, Pedro thought, was the time to begin.

It would affect Reed less, than to have him discover in one brief moment that all was lost; so he whispered hoarsely, and with a perfectly furious expression:

"By St. Iago, Senor Reed, they have entered the *jacal*! See, there has been a hole broken in the thatch!"

"May Satan burn them!" yelled Rodney Reed. "Follow me, Pedro—they shall not have the gold!"

"I'll kill every mother's son of them!"

"Follow me, Pedro Pernaless!"

CHAPTER XIII.

FOR LIBERTY AND LIFE.

No human being could have suffered more torture than did Clarence Coleman, after the fury and excitement had somewhat subsided.

He had left the beautiful city, which had been, and he had trusted would be, his home, as long as life lasted, behind him, perhaps forever!

He had left, under the saddest and most horrid circumstances that could be imagined, the beautiful maiden, who was the one bright dream of his life!

Thus he felt, as he lashed his horse onward.

He had escaped the mad mob who were howling for his blood, he had escaped an ignominious death; but he was a fugitive from justice, in the eyes of the world—an outlaw, with every man's hand turned against him!

Innocent, honest, and upright, had he been through life; but, what had it availed him?

He was now branded as an assassin, as one who had, in a cowardly manner, stabbed his employer to the heart, in his own home. The proofs against him were convincing—they were appalling, even to himself.

Too late had he realized the utterly depraved, unnatural, and fiendish character of Rodney Reed.

Most cunningly, indeed, had the miscreant planned and executed his premeditated, and most horrible crime. He now perceived that Reed had hurled the stone, which had knocked him senseless by the side of Nora Norrington, in the bottom-timber, with a two-fold end in view.

It was, that his head might be bruised and bloody, when he would be found beside the corpse of the murdered man; and that the old banker might be clutching the stone in the death grip, as evidence that he had fought for life, and had succeeded in wounding his murderer on the head.

The stone, the stolen knife, his bruised and bleeding head, and blood-stained hands, were all sufficient evidence against him; especially as he had been found alone with the corpse of Norman Norrington.

And then, no one knew that he had been engaged in copying during the night.

It was true he had been accosted by some loungers around the Plaza Bar, as he had left the bank; but that would be against him, more than in his favor.

It was terrible, to think of the banker, brutally murdered in his own library.

It was more terrible still, to think of poor Nora, as he had last seen her, senseless, and deathlike; her face stamped with a horror and anguish, that were fearful to contemplate.

It really would be a mercy—so it seemed to the young man—if the poor girl's consciousness were never to come back to her in this world, rather than she should recover, to suffer the anguish, grief and horror, that would be hers.

Clarence reasoned that Nora, after the negroes had repeated his words, as he had bade them do, would not, and could not—even had she previously entertained any suspicions in connection with his agency in the murder of her father—believe him to have had a hand in the horrid deed; and that, although she had seen his silver-handled bowie projecting from the breast of the corpse.

He had before his mind's eye, almost constantly, two pictures. The one was of Nora, as she came to her senses, fastened in her chair, and beheld her murdered father, and himself all blood-stained. The other was, as he had last seen her, so pale, and still, and deathlike, upon her couch.

No wonder was it, that Clarence Coleman was forced to the very borders of insane desperation, by such agonizing visions and thoughts.

He had never been of a quarrelsome disposi-

tion. He had avoided, most religiously, discussions of all kinds; and he had a holy horror of the desperate characters of Western Texas, who were given to whirling the festive revolver about their heads, and to take a snap-shot at any man who so much as looked cross-eyed at them. But, he began to actually detest his fellow-man, the moment he heard the fierce yells and denunciations of the mad mob, and their howls for his life.

He had left hope behind him, and nothing but black despair seemed his prospective portion.

All this caused him to entertain the most bitter and murderous hatred toward the infamous author of all his and Nora Norrington's misery.

Clarence Coleman resolved, that he would keep his oath to the letter; and that the knife, with which Rodney Reed had committed the cowardly assassination, should be buried in the miscreant's own breast, and by no other hand than his!

Not for a moment did the thought that this dastardly murder had left Nora free to wed the man of her choice, occur to Clarence Coleman; and he would have banished the thought, had it been born in his brain, with self-contempt and self-abhorrence.

Indeed, there appeared to be little hope of his ever again seeing Nora Norrington, even did she believe him innocent; for, public opinion would be too strong against him, to allow of their ever again meeting, until even the slightest suspicion of guilt, as far as he was concerned, had been banished.

The only way to clear himself, the only hope that remained to the young man in life, was, through forcing Rodney Reed to confess the murder. But this was too unreasonable an anticipation to be entertained for a moment.

It seemed that there had been no one who had witnessed the deed. There had been, it appeared, no one near except the murdered man's daughter; and she had been chloroformed, previously, by the assassin. It was barely possible that Nora might have recognized Reed, before the drug had entirely stupefied her; but there were slight grounds for supposing this, as the villain had evidently proceeded with the utmost care and caution in every detail, else he would not have consummated his fiendish scheme, and escaped.

It occurred to Clarence that Reed must have visited the office and suspended the key to the chandelier, expressly with the object of ascertaining if he would have time to commit the crime and escape before his fellow-clerk could reach the mansion with the copied papers.

Probably Rodney Reed had long been waiting for an opportunity to do the deed, with the view of getting rid of a rival forever, and at the same time, of the father of the maiden, who he had resolved should be either his wife or his victim.

He had no doubt that the wretch had, after committing the assault upon him, stolen up the river, secreted himself among the vines near the veranda, and while there had heard the conversation between him and their employer, which had decided the dastard to act, and at once.

All these reflections came home to the mind of the unhappy Clarence as he sped on, passing the ruins of the "Eight Mile Mission," and then dashing in among the dense mesquites, where he secreted the horse in a thicket, and climbed a pecan tree in the adjacent bottom-timber, on the border of the same.

Soon after, in a scattered manner, galloped the would-be lynchers, upon the horses of Norman Norrington, in pursuit of himself, and the sight rendered the young man furious.

He longed to gallop after them and drop a few from their saddles, but prudence prevailed; and again he reflected that these men, half-crazed with drink, were not responsible for their actions, nor were they capable of reasoning and considering his character in the past to be in his favor.

It was quite clear to Clarence that the pursuers knew not whether they were on the right track or not, and that they had become nearly disheartened, for those in the lead would halt and confer with those who dashed up. It was plain that all wished themselves back in San Antonio.

And Clarence was right. Shortly after, the discouraged party rode slowly back on their return.

But Clarence had seen them while some distance off, and he instantly tore out a leaf from his note-book, and hastily wrote the following:

"SHERIFF BARNES:—

"I am an innocent man, hunted like a dog, as the murderer of my employer, between whom and myself there had never passed an unfriendly word.

"I found him dead when I called upon him to deliver some papers, which I had been requested to sit up and copy for one Montgomery, a ranchero. My knife had been stolen from me when I lay in a senseless condition from the blow of a stone thrown at me—as I would stake my life—by Rodney Reed.

"HE IS THE ASSASSIN!"

"I send you the keys of the bank safe, in which is an immense sum in stocks, bonds and gold. I will send you the combination another time.

"CLARENCE COLEMAN."

Descending the tree, Clarence stole through the mesquites, and placing the note, within which he had placed the key to the safe, in the middle of the road—taking care to address it to—

"Bob Barnes, Sheriff of Bexar county," and to put on one corner—

"From Clarence Coleman," he returned to his lookout in the pecan-tree.

As he had supposed, his pursuers were inspired with great zeal, and much encouraged by the finding of the note, for they were positive they would have observed it had it been lying on the road when they had passed down.

They at once scattered and galloped in every direction through the mesquites, with revolvers in hand at full-cock, ready to pull trigger the instant they discovered the fugitive.

But ere long they returned to the spot where they had picked up the note, some of them having passed beneath the very tree within the branches of which was concealed the very man whom they wished to find.

Then they took a different view of affairs.

They unanimously concluded that the missive must have been lying in the road when they first passed along the same, not having been observed on account of all being riding at full speed, and not watching the road, but inspecting the mesquites which bordered it on each side.

They were satisfied that they had done their whole duty faithfully, as far as they had gone, and their consciences were at rest.

Not so their appetites, however.

They all returned up the river, anxious now above all things to allay the cravings for the liquor of which their long ride had caused them to deprive themselves.

Clarence Coleman again descended the tree, mounted his horse, and rode on in the direction of the Rio Medina, where, amid the dark shades of the bottom-timber, he felt that he could find a secure retreat in which he could rest and think over the details of his truly awful position.

Had he remained in the tree but five minutes longer, he would have seen three villainous looking Greasers with swarthy and repulsive faces, spur out from the the mesquites after the passing of the party of Texans, and urge their horses down the road, keeping their animals on the grass-grown sward, to prevent the sounds made by their hoofs from being heard.

But a little distance had Clarence traveled, before the three hired emissaries of Red Reed were satisfied that they had struck the trail of the man they sought, for they caught a glimpse of a solitary horseman as they peered around the mesquites, at a bend in the trail.

Clarence Coleman was indeed under a dark cloud, and one that threatened to inclose him and extinguish hope and life!

CHAPTER XIV.

A TANGLED WEB.

PEDRO PERNALES made an exhibition of daring recklessness, indeed an extravagant bluster, after pointing out the hole in the thatch of the *jacal* to Red Reed.

Had the latter been less excited and furious at the position of affairs, he might have concluded, and with good cause, that, had not Pedro known of the hole in the roof, he would not now have perceived it; for, it was within the shade of the willows, and only discernible after the most careful scrutiny. Indeed, Reed did not distinguish it but took his confederate's word for the truth of the matter.

The latter had, upon meeting Reed, manifested great terror, and fear at being captured; even refusing to return, and fight for the gold, when pressed in no gentle manner to do so. In consequence, he felt called upon to redeem himself, and gain the good will and admiration of Reed, or at the least to regain the confidence which, he feared, his "pard" had lost in him.

He, therefore, dashed on ahead, knife in hand, in a desperate manner; bidding Reed remain outside, and keep his revolver bearing upon the aperture in the roof, while he entered the hovel. Thus they would make sure that none of the thieves would escape.

The Mexican then sprang in, shut the door, placed his back against it, and cried out:

"Shoot every man that climbs out, Senor Capitan! I'm inside, and I'm going to drive them to the wall!"

Reed could hear the sound of the lock being turned, and he began to fear that Pedro would be slain; thinking it pure madness for one man thus to enter the *jacal* in the dark, and lock the door, when there might be several inside.

He did not dare harbor the thought that the robbers had secured their booty, and decamped; he, therefore, held his revolver leveled, ready to fire at the first head that should appear.

Yet Rodney Reed knew that the report of his revolver would alarm the sleeping Greasers in the neighboring hovels—that it would even attract men from the Plazas—and this would undoubtedly be dangerous for himself personally. But he was desperate, and thought only of the vast fortune that was at stake.

It was a moment of the most intense anxiety to Reed, who little thought that the tale told him by Pedro had been concocted in the Mexican's brain; neither had he any idea that

the latter had formed another little plot, while running toward the hovel.

A moment of deep stillness followed the clicking of the lock, as Pedro fastened himself within. Then came to the ears of Reed, the sound of a terrific struggle; with deep curses, and the clashing of knives, and overturning of furniture!

The next moment, there came a cry of agony, followed by a pleading call for help. This satisfied Reed that, unless he went to the assistance of his yellow-skinned pard, the "jig was up"—the gold was lost!

In the greatest excitement he ran and threw himself against the door, which flew open.

The next he heard was the sound of a heavy blow, and then came the sudden fall of a human being upon the hard clay floor.

Then Pedro Pinales stepped from the doorway into the moonlight, panting laboriously as he muttered:

"Caramba! That was a lucky plan. By the time Senor Reed comes to his senses, he will be prepared to receive the bad news, and he will not think of accusing Pedro. But the doubloons must be found. I'll have them, if I spill blood! And Senor Reed must be frightened from San Antonio."

After recovering from his fierce struggle with the chairs and an old table, all of which had been demolished in the sham fight, the Greaser again entered and lighted a candle.

Stretched upon the floor was the form of Red Reed, senseless, and with a great bruise upon his head, from which the blood was flowing.

Pedro grinned bideously.

It was a great joke to the Mexican.

Not so, however, to Reed; for the Greaser had struck his white pard a fearful blow to make sure that he would fall like a log.

Closing the door, he now took a billet of wood and gave himself a sharp knock on the head also; but, as no blood flowed, he pricked the swelling with his knife.

Pedro Pinales had no intention of doing business by halves.

Then he seated himself upon the floor, and reaching up the side of the building, he took down a gourd that was filled with water and poured it over Reed's head, and his own "cacha."

The Mexican then sat, his legs drawn up, and his head bowed forward upon them; but keeping an eye upon his still unconscious friend. As soon as the latter began to revive Pedro commenced to groan, but in a low, weak manner.

Twice Reed rolled over, groaning heavily. Then his eyes opened, but it was evident that the miscreant had not the remotest idea where he was or what had happened.

Soon, however, he caught a view of the form of his pard, all doubled up, and heard his moans of distress. He then sprang to a sitting posture and glared about the *jacal*, at first in bewilderment; then, as the near past flashed upon his mind, he staggered to his feet and yelled in a rage:

"Satan burn me forever! The devil is to pay and no pitch hot! Rouse up, man! The gold is gone—I'll bet my life on it! But, I'll have it back, or lose my life trying."

"In the fiend's name, what does it mean? Whodid you find here? Rouse up, I say! Speak, man! Hang me, if I don't believe I'm going stark staring mad!"

But the head of Pedro moved not. He kept up the same low moaning. Reed was almost beside himself in reality.

"Confound it!" he exclaimed, as he staggered forward, clutched the forelock of the Mexican, and jerked his head upward. But the face, and even the eyes of Pedro were expressionless.

"Devil take me if they didn't give him a harder welt than they did me!" he muttered; "but I'll search for some liquor—I need it myself."

Rodney Reed took the candle, and passed behind the cow-hide screen. Then he made a sudden halt, leaning against the end of the wretched building for support. A suspicion, strong as a conviction, had shot through his brain, and caused him to become faint.

The empty sack lay before him!

But it was not this that so greatly affected him. He had been almost prepared, after what had happened, to find the gold and stocks missing.

There was something else.

It was the chest, in which he had placed the clothes worn by him, when he murdered Norman Norrington.

The lid of this chest was thrown open, and there were plain proofs that the hasp had been forcibly knocked out of place. Indeed, it lay upon the floor; and the wood, into which it had been driven, was broken and splintered.

Reed remembered that he had given Pedro the key, and had instructed him to bury the bundle.

Why, then, had the chest been broken open, if it had not been done by some one else?

He believed the Mexican had lied!

The scoundrel had not buried the blood-stained clothing.

It had been stolen!

It was now in the hands of some person or persons, who would, by identifying the horrid

garments, prove him to have been the murderer of the old banker!

Then there came another thought into the miscreant's mind.

If the bundle had not been stolen previous to Pedro's having met him among the mesquites, the Greaser would have had no occasion to have asserted that he had buried it; and, if the clothing had been stolen at that time, as a matter of course, the gold and stocks had been taken then also.

It was terrible to Red Reed, thus to be forced, by the evidences of his own senses, to the conclusion that the only man in the whole world whom he had trusted, and upon whom he had depended so entirely, had proved a traitor to him—that this man himself had, in all probability, removed and secreted the ill-gotten treasure!

But he would speedily ascertain if such had, indeed, been the case.

Reed believed that he could satisfy himself of the faithfulness or treachery of his yellow-skinned accomplice, by one single question. This, in the state of mind in which the Mexican now was would, by the manner in which he received it, reveal all that he so much wished to know. If treacherous, he could scarcely stand the test that he would put him to.

The alarmed assassin was resolved to know the worst.

Pedro felt that something was wrong—that Reed had discovered something which had awakened his suspicions, or he would not have remained silent so long, but would have returned with the liquor.

It was clear to him that his Texan pard had given up all hope in connection with the gold, when he recovered, and realized what had taken place. Therefore, his continued silence, and absence behind the screen, must have originated in something connected with the clothing; and which was of as much, and more, importance to Rodney Reed, than even the gold.

However, for the life of him, Pedro could not think of any possible evidence against his assertion, that he had buried the bundle.

But his mind was intent upon the subject, when Reed returned with the liquor.

The latter lifted the head of the Mexican, and poured a small stream of whisky into his mouth. Then, when he perceived the eyes of his patient beginning to brighten, and knew that he must be recovering, he spoke out quickly, and in a most peremptory manner.

"Pedro, give me the key to the chest! Quick, I say—I wish to look inside of it!"

Like a flash of light, all was plain to Pedro Pinales.

Just in the nick of time to save his life, the cause of Reed's suspicious silence behind the screen, and his delay there, were plain to the wily Mexican.

He knew that Reed had discovered that the chest had been broken open, instead of being unlocked; as would have been the case, had he taken out the bundle.

He knew that his life hung by a hair—that a cocked revolver was at the back of his head, ready to blow out his brains on the instant.

"I have not got the key, Senor Reed! I lost it, soon after you gave it to me, and I was forced to break open the chest. But, what has happened? My head is crushed in!"

That answer, given so promptly, saved Pedro's life, and greatly relieved and rejoiced Rodney Reed.

In a little time, both had regained their powers of reasoning; but they became more enraged, as they realized that they had lost a fortune.

The Greaser procured a torch, and examined the ground, around the *jacal*; ascertaining, from the foot-prints, that a mere youth had been alone in committing the robbery.

Reed Reed was elated at even this slight encouragement. He urged Pedro to continue the search, and follow the trail.

Had there not been so much for him to think of, and that all suspicions of the treachery of Pedro had vanished, Reed might have reasoned that it was very queer that the Mexican should have had sense and control over himself, sufficient to have poured the water over his face and head, and then relapse into the state in which he had found him. This would have re-awakened his doubts and suspicions.

CHAPTER XV.

UNSHAKEN FIDELITY.

SAN ANTONIO was wild with excitement.

From the fact that Norman Norrington had been assassinated in his own house, and, as was believed, by one of his confidential clerks, the clamors of the citizens were universal for the pursuit, and immediate execution of Clarence Coleman.

Sheriff Barnes, upon reading the note that was brought him by the night pursuers, was greatly puzzled. He immediately called into consultation William Lyons, the chief detective of Bexar county.

These two men were personally acquainted with Coleman, and were prepossessed in the

young man's favor. Yet, they had been compelled to admit that the proofs against him were overwhelming.

Upon the receipt of the note, however, they became confident that Clarence was innocent; but for all that, there seemed but little hope of proving it.

Rodney Reed's well-known habits were against him, yet it did not seem possible that he would have the nerve to commit such a crime, and there was apparently no motive, as no one suspected Reed's love for his employer's daughter, and therefore they knew nothing of his jealousy.

Lyons advised the working up of the case in a secret manner, and he resolved to begin at once making investigations.

Both he and Barnes were of the opinion that it was their first move to visit the offices of the old banker, and assure themselves that all was right in that quarter.

It was not yet daylight, and the news of the murder had not become general; therefore there was no crowd about the bank.

The two men entered and locked themselves in.

To their amazement, they found a key in the safe-door, and the same slightly ajar.

Jerking open the door, Lyons uttered a cry of astonishment.

The safe had been robbed!

But, how was it? The key forwarded by Coleman, was the original one. The one found in the safe was a roughly made duplicate.

The detective stooped and picked up a crumpled half-sheet of foolscap, which, upon being smoothed out, was found to be written upon.

It was the note of warning left by Clarence, and which we have read.

After perusing this the two men were satisfied that it was strong evidence in favor of Coleman and against Reed, who, they now felt was not only the assassin, but the robber of the safe. Here had been a motive, supposing that Reed held strong enmity against Coleman.

It was evident that Reed had visited the office, ascertained that his fellow clerk was copying at night, and knowing the nature and importance of the papers which called for this work out of hours, had felt positive that Coleman would go to the mansion to deliver them to the old banker.

Thus timing the arrival of Clarence, the villain had slain Norrington and escaped, having, in some manner gained possession of Coleman's knife, which, with the other circumstantial evidence, made out so strong a case against him.

They noticed also several drops of fresh blood on and near the desk.

Thus far, matters looked favorable toward vindicating Coleman, but there seemed to be no grounds as yet for arresting Rodney Reed—the cunning villain having made sure that there had been no witnesses of his movements.

Barnes and Lyons decided that it would be wrong to disclose the fact that the safe had been robbed, as this would only increase the excitement, and they wished to move with deliberation. Consequently they departed, locking the offices, and leaving a placard upon the door, upon which was the following:

"Norman Norrington was murdered last night.

"This office is in the care of the proper officials; all information in regard to the murder will soon be made known.

"Clarence Coleman is believed to be innocent of the charge brought against him!

"The real murderer is at large, and \$500 is the reward offered by Robert Barnes, Sheriff of Bexar county, for him, after all doubts are dispelled as to his guilt.

"The mayor will, without doubt, offer an equal sum, after being made acquainted with the facts in the case. (Signed), ROBERT BARNES, WILLIAM LYONS."

The two men parted at the Main Plaza, Barnes returning to his home and Lyons proceeding at once to the Norrington Mansion.

The coroner was already in charge.

At daylight a jury was to be summoned.

We must now pay our attention to Nora, after the escape of Clarence.

It was some time before the nearly distracted negroes succeeded in reviving the poor girl, and even then she lay in a semi-conscious state, gazing fixedly upon the ceiling of the apartment. The chloroform, together with the terrible shocks she had experienced, produced a strange effect upon the maiden's brain. A physician was called in, and after restoratives had been administered, she became more natural.

She knew that her father was dead—murdered!—and she had seen in his breast the well-known knife of her lover. She had beheld the form of Clarence Coleman standing near the corpse, and with blood upon his face and hands!

All this was indelibly stamped upon the brain of Nora Norrington, with all its dread significance. There had been, at the first instant, the thought that her father and Clarence had quarreled, and that her lover had slain him; but this vanished in a moment, although the scene seemed so strongly to indicate it.

A second glance at Clarence, and she felt

confident of his innocence, yet hopeless of ever being able to prove it to the world.

As she slowly came back to her natural state of mind, Nora bent her eyes upon the sympathetic face of Dr. Dare, and spoke with a calmness which surprised both herself and the physician.

"Doctor," she said, "I thank you for your kind attention. I feel better, but still very strangely. I seem to have little control over my mind, and I find it impossible to express the feelings which seem to lie dormant. But for this, however, I believe I should go insane."

"It is very providential, Miss Norrington," replied Dr. Dare, "that your brain, through the action of the chloroform, has been left in such a state. But, you must have an opiate now. It is necessary that you should sleep."

"When you awake, I promise to answer all your questions to the best of my ability, and to give you all the information I can gain in the mean time."

"Thanks, doctor! You are very kind."

Nora then swallowed the medicine offered her, and almost immediately fell into a deep slumber. She had only awakened from this, when a note from Lyons, the detective, was brought to her.

Dr. Dare was still in attendance; and, as he had been unable to learn much of the particulars from the negroes, he felt relieved at this visit from Lyons. The detective was at once, at the earnest solicitation of Nora, shown into her apartment.

Few unnecessary words passed between them.

The young girl prevented this, by asking at once, and with intense eagerness:

"Mr. Lyons, will you please inform me as to the whereabouts of Mr. Clarence Coleman? I wish very much to see him."

"Miss Norrington, I have no knowledge whatever, in regard to Mr. Coleman. He has not been seen since the tragedy."

"Then he escaped?"

"Escaped what?" asked Lyons, surprised that Nora should know of the suspicions against the young man.

"Mr. Lyons, I know nothing of the horrors of the past night, except what I saw myself, in one brief moment of consciousness. But from what I then saw, I know that Clarence Coleman has been the victim of a vile plot, which was intended to end his life in an ignominious manner."

"I know that my father sent him to the office, to do some copying, bidding him bring the papers to him after they had been prepared; for a Mr. Montgomery was to call in the morning, before office hours, for them."

"He copied the documents, but when he came here to deliver them, he found that my father had been murdered, but a few minutes previous; that he had been stabbed with his knife—a bowie, which had his name engraved upon it!"

"His presence in the library, that knife, and the fact that his head was bruised—which I can account for—were sufficient proofs, the real assassin believed, to convict Mr. Coleman of the murder. That, I believe, is the true state of affairs."

"Were you present, Miss Norrington, when your father requested young Coleman to copy those papers?"

"I was in the parlors, and they on the veranda. I heard every word that passed between them on the occasion."

"I am glad to be able to establish that much," said the detective. "Now, about the wound on Clarence Coleman's head?"

"I will confide in you and Dr. Dare," said Nora; "for all that I have to say must be made public soon. Clarence Coleman and I are engaged!"

"Rodney Reed has been jealous of Mr. Coleman for some time, although he knows that I hate and abhor him. He has insulted me frequently, by look and manner; but I did not inform any one of it."

"My father was not aware of the relations between Mr. Coleman and myself. We met by appointment, near the gardens, last evening; and it was while conversing, that some lurking spy—who could have been no other than Rodney Reed—threw a stone, which struck Clarence on the head, and knocked him senseless."

"I fainted, also; and the spy, undoubtedly, threw water upon our heads, and then fled. I believe, as I have just said, that it was Rodney Reed; and that he, at that time, knocked Mr. Coleman senseless, in order that he might steal his knife."

"He had, I have no doubt, at that time perfected his plan to murder my father, and leave such proofs as would be the means of convicting Clarence of the crime!"

CHAPTER XVI.

SUSPICION HAUNTS THE GUILTY MIND.

"I WILL state here, confidentially," said Lyons to Nora and the doctor, "that the sheriff received, through those who pursued Clarence Coleman, a note from him, inclosing the key of the safe. In this note, Mr. Coleman accuses

Rodney Reed of having felled him to the earth with a stone, and having stolen his knife."

"He also charges Reed with the murder. But we have no evidence, on which we can convict him. I shall go at once to the scene of the assault. There seems to have been a double motive for it."

"You must pardon me, Miss Norrington, for having thus forced upon your mind these dreadful details; but, as I have no doubt, an innocent man has been forced to fly, as an outlaw, through the jealous hatred of a cowardly assassin, we must repress our feelings, and think of what we have to do."

"You are right," said Dr. Dare, "but my patient must be permitted to rest now. You may feel assured, Miss Nora, all will be done that can be done."

"A moment longer, Mr. Lyons," said the young lady. "You have mentioned that Clarence sent the key to the safe. In what manner was it delivered, and at what point?"

"It was placed by him in the middle of the down-river road, where the pursuing-party found it. He was, beyond a doubt, watching them from a covert; but they could not find him, although they claim to have searched."

"But the key is useless, without the combination."

"The note states, Miss Norrington, that the combination will be sent later; but, I may as well tell you now, as later, that we do not need it."

"But, I insist, Mr. Lyons, upon having the safe opened. I have my suspicions that there was a double motive in the murder. In short, I firmly believe that Rodney Reed would rob the safe; indeed, he would commit any crime to further his revenge."

"Miss Norrington," returned the detective, "we found a key, that had been roughly manufactured, in the lock, and all the valuables missing."

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed the doctor.

The face of Nora Norrington was a study, but more expressive of bewilderment than aught else.

"That makes all plain," she said, at length. "Rodney Reed planned to commit the deed, at the time when Clarence had the keys, in order that the robbery might be laid to Clarence, and thus furnish his motive for the murder. He must be arrested, at once, for the robbery of the safe. That will insure his safe custody, pending the collection of evidence that will convict him of the assassination of my poor father."

Not until she had said this, did poor Nora break down. She hid her face in the pillow, and sobbed as though her heart would break.

Lyons quietly withdrew from the apartment, at a significant glance from Dr. Dare.

He left the house, passing through the gardens, toward the river, and the timber; little thinking that the serpent-like eyes of Red Reed were watching his every movement, with an expression of the greatest apprehension.

The miscreant was insanely eager to know what was going on in the Norrington Mansion, and also drawn by an irresistible impulse to the scene of his heinous crime. He had left Pedro studying the trail of the supposed youth who had made off with their booty, and hastened by stealth to the house of his victim; climbing up to the top of the veranda, amid the vines, until near the window of Nora's apartment.

While there, Reed had heard all that was said in regard to himself, the robbery, and the murder.

He lay, crouched low, and with set teeth and clinched hands, listening to the words that almost drove him into spasms.

He realized, when too late, that all his carefully arranged plot had been for nothing; that he had bated his hands in blood, robbed his employer's safe, and yet was no nearer to gaining his great object—the fair Nora herself—than at the first. Indeed, he had placed an awful barrier between her and him—one that could be bridged only by more crime!

He had allowed his fury and hatred, to carry him too far.

He had, in the first place, made a fool of himself, by entering the office, and secreting himself under the lounge; and leaving proofs of his proserce behind him. Again, he had shown his idiocy, by not having destroyed the note of warning that Clarence had left upon his desk. But, worse than all, he had left the key in the safe, and the door ajar, when he had depended upon the robbery's remaining a secret, until he had perfected his plans of escape, should matters work against him.

Another most humiliating mistake he now saw that he had made. That was in having had Pedro take charge of the treasure. Instead, he should have carried it at once from the city, and secreted it somewhere on the Rio Medina.

Reed had little hope of Pedro's being able to trace out the robber, and less of regaining the gold, yet he knew he must have money or he could not carry out the last and great part of his plot.

Clarence Coleman he hoped would be captured by the three Mexicans he had sent out.

The intention of Reed had been to make himself conspicuous about town, poisoning the minds of all, and hinting that Coleman had all the keys belonging to the offices, and had probably robbed his employer before murdering him.

Such a course he now saw, since hearing the conference between Miss Norrington, Dr. Dare and the detective, would be simply suicide.

He was satisfied that he would be arrested if he appeared on the streets or plazas of the city.

He must, of necessity, keep in hiding.

He must, also, secure quite a large sum of money, for his only hope was in getting together a band of lawless men and escaping to the border, near the Rio Grande.

This would be impossible without a lavish expenditure of gold.

But not for an instant did Rodney Reed lose sight of the one grand object of all objects—namely, getting Nora Norrington in his power and at his mercy.

Through his fierce passion for her, love alternating with hate, he had outlawed himself, placed his life in jeopardy, by crime committed that he might gain her.

He had impoverished the poor girl, and slain her father, and now his miscreant employees were on the trail of her only protector—her lover, Clarence Coleman—whom he intended to torture as no man ever before was tortured.

Clarence Coleman, a captive to himself, should, when bound like a dog, behold Nora Norrington in the passionate embrace of her father's murderer.

Ye gods! that would indeed be revenge.

He would accomplish it yet.

He would not be foiled.

The reverses he had met with so far might discourage some men, but he was cast in a different mold.

Rodney Reed was made of sterner stuff.

Thus the wretch argued.

He would abduct Nora the following night, or die in the attempt.

It would be death for him, in any event, if he remained. Go, he must; and he resolved that he would not go alone or empty-handed.

Should he succeed in getting Clarence and Nora into his power, then indeed would he be victorious, and he would laugh at all San Antonio. But to do this, there was much to think over, much to do as well as plan; and besides, there was gold to be secured.

All these thoughts were in the mind of the miscreant, as he lay on the veranda roof.

The revelations of Lyons had dumfounded him, and caused him to decide that the fates were against him; but he mentally swore that he would win or die, and dying, would send others to their doom!

He perceived that he must return to the San Pedro, and secrete himself until the following night, which he vowed should be as eventful as the one just past.

Few more thoroughly desperate men could have been found than Rodney Reed, as he crawled back over the roof of the veranda, and down one of its vine-covered supports. Then he disappeared in the shrubbery, being led by curiosity to proceed up the river, and past the point where, he felt confident, Lyons was examining the ground, to discover traces of his presence in the thicket, at the time that the stone had been hurled at Clarence Coleman.

There was not much to be discovered, of that he felt assured; but the detective was a dangerous man to be allowed at large, and Red Reed was resolved that, for the present he would run as few risks as possible.

He stole cautiously forward, and made his way across the river upon projecting rocks; securing a large stone from the bottom of the stream as he crossed, the same size as the similar missile he had flung at Clarence, and the one he had left in the dead hand of his victim.

Filled with an almost overpowering hatred toward all who were endeavoring to trace up his crimes, and wishing to let Lyons know he defied him, now that he was in truth an outlaw, Reed determined to give the detective proof of that defiance; and, not that alone, but also of his presence near the place where the crimes had been committed.

Stealing to a thicket which bordered the river-bank, Red Reed gazed across the stream, and discovered the man he sought.

Lyons was upon his hands and knees, evidently examining a footprint; for, by this time it was getting quite clear in the heavens. The detective, now and then, however, ignited a match, to aid him in his examination.

Doubly infuriated at what he saw, Reed sprang from the thicket, and hurled the stone.

With a sickening sound, the missile struck Lyons upon the head; and he fell, as if a bullet had pierced his brain!

With an exultant yell, the fiend bounded up the river for some distance, crossed the same, and hastened stealthily, amid the mesquites, toward the San Pedro.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CRIMSON COYOTES.

WHEN Red Reed approached the *jacal* of Pedro, after having felled Lyons, as we have seen, in the bottom-timber, he was in a most desperate and dangerous frame of mind.

He had slept but little for several nights past, for he had lain awake planning the crimes which he intended to commit, and yet leave, as he believed, no evidence against himself. The last and most excitingly eventful night had seen his brain and body strained to the utmost in every way.

He therefore felt the need of stimulants, he having denied himself for several hours, and this craving, which took possession of him as he drew near the *jacal*, recalled to the assassin's mind the brandy flask, which he had lost about the time of his committing the murder.

He believed now that Lyons would find it and would trace it and him to the Bull's Head, where he had procured it.

He began to curse himself for having, in little details, caused the best regulated plot to fail utterly.

Even his last act had been a most foolish one.

The detective would at once decide that no one but the man whom he was tracing up could have buried the stone. This would prove to him that his "game" had not yet flown.

It would increase greatly the eagerness of Lyons to secure him. It would make him double his efforts to hunt him down.

It was just possible, however, that the blow might have fractured the skull of Lyons, or, indeed, have killed him outright.

Should this prove to be the case, the whole city would be up in arms.

Red Reed mentally confessed that he had made an ass of himself in various ways, all through the business.

Had he not depended so much—in fact, based all his hopes—upon Pedro Pinales, he might have entertained stronger doubts and suspicions in regard to the latter, in connection with the disappearance of the gold and stocks; he might even have accused the Mexican of his perfidy. But it was not policy for him to make an enemy of the man upon whom he so much depended, even though matters might point toward the "crookedness" of the Greaser.

However, he decided that he would watch Pedro, and he believed he could tell pretty soon by the actions of the Mexican whether he had any hand in the disappearance of the booty.

It was daylight when Reed reached the vicinity of the *jacal*, and he was obliged to skulk with great caution along the bank of the San Pedro beneath the willows to avoid observation, although he could perceive no one stirring. The only human being in sight was Pedro, upon hands and knees, evidently still studying the "sign" left by the person who had entered the hovel by the roof and carried off the gold.

From that moment Reed banished all his suspicions against the Mexican.

It was certain that Pedro would not have manifested such zeal or be engaged in examining so long and so carefully the traces of the night prowler had he been in any way connected with him.

From the fact that the Greaser knew nothing of the presence of his white pard, the latter was now convinced that he was true and loyal to him and his interests.

It was now much clearer, and Pedro could detect the traces of the thief quite easily in the moist soil on the bank of the creek.

At once, upon hearing the approach of Reed, the Mexican sprung behind the trunk of the large willow, and the ominous click of the lock of his revolver sounded on the morning air. But a peculiar low whistle caused him to put up the weapon and step forward from behind the tree, seeming much relieved at seeing his confederate, who advanced quickly, saying:

"Well, Pedro, what luck?"

"Not much, Senor Reed. Where have you been so long, and what news?"

Red Reed related all that had transpired, and all that; and, as he closed, Pedro appeared very anxious and apprehensive.

"By St. Iago! Senor Reed," he exclaimed, "we must ride fast when night again comes. San Antonio is too small for men like us."

"Senor Lyons would like to get me in his clutches. If he has seen you and me walking or speaking together, he will decide that I have been mixed up in this scrape. He has spies among the Mexicans, men whom he pays well, and for gold they would sell their own souls."

"Santa Maria! Why left you the key and paper in the office, and why buried you that rock at Lyons? He is as cunning as a fox. We must not stay in town to-day, or we are lost. What shall we do?"

"I know I have made a fool of myself; but I don't intend to be beat. I'll win my game, or die! But we must have money, and I propose to get it."

"If the boys capture Coleman, all will be well; for we'll abduct Nora Norrington to-morrow night and skip toward the Rio Grande."

After that we'll roll in gold. But we must have enough now to carry us through. We want horses, too, and a dozen good men."

"Come, let us get inside the *jacal*! I want some liquor to brace me up, and then we will form our plans. Have you found no clew of the thief who has taken our gold?"

The Greaser made no reply, until after they had entered the hut and taken a drink. Then he answered:

"Senor Reed, I do not give you any hope, but I wish to follow up a trail, although I have but slight grounds for so doing."

"Tell me if you have not been intimate with a senorita who has cause to be jealous of you, or perchance to hate you, for failing to keep your word? I have good reasons for asking you this?"

"That's all right, Pedro. Yes, I have. She's a pretty little piece enough, by the name of Nita Nichols. Her father was an American. She has been pestering me for a year past to marry her. Why do you ask?"

"Because I begin to believe that we are not watched, and that I was not followed—consequently the person who took the gold must have been here when we were, and would not have been here then unless on some previous occasion you had been followed when you visited me."

"To me it appears that, judging from the 'sign,' the person who was here and took away the gold and papers, was a woman, disguised as a man. The tracks were made by small boots, and the steps are too short for a man, or even a boy. Look here!"

The Mexican then produced several long black hairs, that were evidently from a woman's head.

"I found these caught in the thatch!" he said.

"By Heavens!" exclaimed Reed, "you should have been a detective, Pedro. You have indeed struck a clew. But it is a good thing all round if it was Nita, for we'll get everything back. At the same time, I feel like strangling her."

"Pedro, you're a brick! Pass the bottle, will you? I begin to feel better. We'll skin through all right yet, and with a fortune to start on."

"But how are we going to work the racket to get the money back? Nita has done this from revenge, or to get a hold on me; and she's a regular little devil when she gets her mad up. I'm almost afraid of her."

"It will be more difficult to get back the *ora* than if a man had it, Senor Reed. A woman is hard to understand. The more I think of it, however, the more sure I am that your Nita has been here. Had it been men, who were suspicious of us, the treasure would have been delivered to the sheriff, and ourselves, too, by this time."

"Well, you must keep shady. I will go to the house of the senorita, and see what is to be seen. We have much to do to-night, if we carry out our proposed plans. Hark!"

The sound of hoofs was heard, and then a signal, which Pedro answered.

"Augustine comes," he said. "He brings good news, or he would not be here so soon."

"Good!" exclaimed Reed, helping himself to the bottle.

Very soon one of the Greasers who had been dispatched to capture Clarence Coleman, entered the hovel hastily.

"Bueno!" said Pedro, "what luck?"

"Senor Coleman is at Rio Medina, tied fast to a tree. *Caramba!* he is a devil! He stabbed Juan and Manuel, both dead. He would have killed me, too, but I knocked him in the head!"

"Good boy!" cried out Red Reed, grasping the Mexican's hand and shaking it. "But you must have some grub and whisky, and then return and guard Coleman until we reach the Medina to-morrow night. Can you get some of your pards to return with you, Augustine?"

"Si, senor; but they will want gold. It is too bad. Three men from Mexico came to San Antonio to-day. They have many doubloons, to buy cattle. We could get the gold without trouble."

"And we will get it!" shouted Reed. "I'm just getting into the run of things. I'll prove that I am 'Red Reed,' with a vengeance! I'll leave a trail of blood from here to the Rio Bravo."

"Get all the men together that you can! We'll have a gang on the Medina to-night, and we'll call ourselves the 'Crimson Coyotes.'"

Pedro, without delay, proceeded to give Augustine directions as to summoning some of his companions in crime, to meet on the Rio Medina the coming night; and he supplied him with food and liquor, to take back on the trail.

Augustine left his horse among the willows, and, stealing among a cluster of miserable *jacals*, soon returned; when, in a few moments, one after another, a half-dozen villainous-looking Mexicans stole into the hovel.

They were at once introduced to Reed, who was profuse in promises of reward; and expatiated upon the bright prospects ahead, under his leadership. His words had little effect, however, until Pedro informed them that "El

Capitan Reed" had killed the great Senor Norrington, in his own *casa*, on the previous night.

From that moment, their would-be leader was looked upon with respect and admiration, as a most daring and fearless man, and well qualified to lead them; and they needed now only the promise of gold to insure their services.

In fifteen minutes more these low-browed, swarthy ruffians had entered the mesquites, by different points, at the south of the city; and, meeting Augustine by appointment, they all proceeded toward the Rio Medina—keeping on the east of the traveled road to the Pleasanton Ford.

Pedro prevailed upon Reed to go with him, to a wild spot in the limestone range, north of the town, there to lie down and sleep until his yellow-skinned pard returned for him. He also promised that he would visit Nita Nichols, and gain all the information he could in regard to the missing treasure, and also the doings and sayings of the people of San Antonio.

He expected, as well, to get together another party of lawless Mexicans for the coming night's service; and, to become members of the proposed band of "Crimson Coyotes," under the leadership of Capitan Red Reed.

And much relieved indeed was Rodney Reed, to gain a place where he could sleep in safety; while he felt confident that everything was working toward success in his infamous and cowardly schemes.

And Pedro Pinales returned to the city, to carry out his part of the programme.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CAPTURE OF CLARENCE.

CLARENCE COLEMAN, after he had assured himself of the finding of his note and the key to the safe, by those who had been in pursuit of him, continued on toward the Medina; feeling somewhat relieved, knowing that Sheriff Barnes would not be carried away with the prevailing excitement, but would investigate matters thoroughly and at once.

Yet the brain of the young man was taxed almost beyond human endurance, when he thought of Nora Norrington, as he had last beheld her; and the scene before her, when she returned to consciousness. It seemed to Clarence, that the powers of evil ruled his destiny at this particular time.

He doubted not that Rodney Reed was in San Antonio, secure in the belief that he had covered his tracks; and that he was safe, from even a suspicion of complicity in the crime which he had so carefully planned.

He well knew that Reed had long hated him, and had kept close watch upon his every movement; but he had not entertained the idea that his fellow-clerk would dare attempt a crime—especially such a fiendish one—with a view of fastening it upon him.

Clarence had suspected Rodney of the intention of robbing the safe, or of abstracting money, or very possibly of forgery, with the design of implicating himself; and, for that reason, he had determined to ask Mr. Norrington to have Reed keep the keys of the safe and office the entire time, and thus prevent an advantage being taken of him in a criminal way. But it was too late.

Perhaps the miscreant had effected an entrance to the safe after having committed the murder, had robbed the murdered man and his daughter of their all, and then decamped.

This, however, was too terrible to think of; and Coleman dismissed the thought from his mind.

He now rode, as in a dream; for he had been deprived of his usual sleep, in addition to the fearful distress of mind under which he labored. He knew that he needed to husband his strength, and to keep his senses in their normal condition; and he was anxious to find some secure retreat, where he could, if his mind permitted, gain some sleep.

Much to his relief, he soon discovered, ahead, the dark serpentine line of timber, that marked the course of the beautiful Rio Medina.

Urging the horse onward—and remembering, at the same time, that he had stolen the animal from either Brown or Brackett—Clarence, in a very short time, found himself beneath the dark, cool shades, and amid a perfect labyrinth of verdure.

The moss-draped and vine-covered limbs shut out, almost entirely, the light of the moon. The few rays that did shoot down to the shades of the undergrowth, served to render the surrounding darkness denser in appearance.

After wandering for some time among cow-paths, Clarence perceived a natural "open." There, he left the horse, after removing and secreting the equipments. He then crawled into an adjacent thicket, and threw himself upon the earth—his forehead resting upon his out-thrown arms.

How long he remained thus, striving to settle his mind upon sleep but without avail, he knew not; but soon he was conscious of the presence of other men in his vicinity.

He at first felt sure that he heard the tramping of horses' hoofs; but this suddenly ceased and was followed by a slight disturbance among the undergrowth. Clarence lay still and listen-

ed intently, being soon fully persuaded that pursuers were on his track and that they were near at hand.

This was simply astonishing to him, for he believed that those who had followed him from the San Antonio river had all turned back discouraged. Ere long, however, he became positive that a spy was crawling toward the "open," on each side of his covert, and another directly toward him.

Clarence became alarmed.

He realized that he was in a dangerous position, and that if he was set upon in the thickets he would be at a disadvantage.

Could he gain the "open," where the horse was feeding, there would be a chance for escape.

With this thought, he crawled forward.

Once he halted, for he had placed his hand upon a branch of deadwood, and it had snapped loudly—thus betraying his presence. But, as he stopped to listen, all was still, and he continued crawling along cautiously, soon gaining the bordering bushes of the "open."

Gazing out from these, Clarence could see nothing to indicate the presence of other human beings besides himself.

Even the horse had not ceased feeding, proving that the animal had not scented danger or the presence of strangers.

Much relieved, the young man crawled out from the bushes; but, at that very instant, two men sprung upon him—one from each side—and as they clutched him, they yelled exultantly for a third to come to their assistance.

At the first glance Clarence saw that his assailants were Mexicans of the lowest order—probably belonging to some band of outlaws—and he sprung to his feet, both the Greasers clinging to him and cursing at the extraordinary exhibition of strength in their intended victim.

Neither of the Mexicans had a weapon in hand, their orders having been to capture Clarence Coleman alive; but they quickly drew knives, as they saw the steel flash in the hand of the desperate man who struggled in their grasp. He seemed to possess the strength of a grizzly bear and the rapid movements of a panther.

But the Greasers were behind time.

With a terrible stroke, right and left, Clarence literally ripped open the chests of the horrified men; who, with fearful yells of agony and terror, fell into each other's arms, as their assailant leaped backward!

It was a horrible sight, there in the clear moonlight as they rolled over, and lay side by side; their faces contorted, and their limbs and bodies writhing in the agonies of an awful death!

Spellbound by the sight, Clarence Coleman stood, his blood-dripping knife extended, his features deadly pale, and with a desperate and hunted look in his eyes; gazing upon the first tragic scene in which he had ever taken a leading part.

But, while he thus stood, there stole out from the dark shades behind him, another swarthy Mexican; his black eyes glittering vengefully, and his white teeth set firmly together. He held a revolver ready in hand, as with the caution of a cat, he stole forward.

The next moment, Clarence Coleman lay, senseless and bleeding, beside the corpses of his victims; stretched there by a terrible blow, delivered by the skulking Greaser—the only survivor of the trio that had been sent in pursuit of him by Rodney Reed!

This Mexican, Augustine, as he was afterward addressed by Pedro, upon his arrival at the *jacal* in San Antonio, bound his captive fast with a lariat, and dragged his senseless form into the thicket.

He also secreted the corpses of his comrades, and then staking their two horses, with the animal that had been ridden by Clarence, he sprung upon his own mustang and rode rapidly off on his return to San Antonio to report, as has been shown, to Red Reed and Pedro Pernaes.

Nita Nichols resolved that, upon the following morning after her strange adventures, she would make a call upon the bereaved girl in the Norrington Mansion.

There was much that she wished to learn.

But first, she wanted to know positively if Miss Norrington and young Coleman really loved each other.

She knew that the latter was not wealthy, or he would not have been in the position of a clerk; and she felt that such a man as she believed him to be would, regardless of his love, choose to remain single rather than wed one so far above him in wealth and station. He, no doubt, intended to carve out a name and fortune before asking the hand of Nora in marriage.

But now all was changed.

The robbery of the safe would leave Nora as poor as Clarence, if not more so.

Nita had now a grand scheme in contemplation.

It was in her power to make two hearts happy.

Although the old banker was dead, Clarence

Coleman would still be actuated by the same pride, which would keep him and Nora apart.

Under the circumstances, Nita Nichols resolved to keep secret the fact that she had in her possession the papers and gold that had been taken from the safe, until such a time as she saw fit to reveal the facts and deliver them up.

To have this power of favoring Clarence Coleman, who had her regard and sympathy from his having been, like herself, so wronged by Rodney Reed, was a great consolation to the poor girl; and it served, somewhat, to mitigate her own bitter sorrows.

She made up her mind that, on the coming night, she would secure the gold that she had buried in the mud of the San Pedro; although she felt assured, that the attempt to do so would be attended with extreme danger to herself. But first, she would, during the day, visit Nora Norrington.

In the morning, as Nita went to the old church on the Plaza, she heard the groups of excited men howling for the blood of Clarence Coleman; and she felt truly thankful, that the innocent young man had escaped the blind vengeance of the rabble.

Terrible, indeed, it would have been for Clarence to have suffered an ignominious death for the crime that had been committed by Rodney Reed!

CHAPTER XIX.

NITA AND NORA.

WILLIAM LYONS lay for a long time, before he recovered from the effects of the blow he had received. Upon coming to himself, he was not long in deciding that the stone had been thrown at him by Rodney Reed; who must have been eavesdropping at the house, and spying upon him afterward.

Lyons was not only furious, when he thought of the cowardly assault, but he resolved that he would place all doubts at rest, in connection with what he had heard of the similar assault upon Clarence Coleman. This last act pointed toward the man who had done the same cowardly deed before.

Previous to being felled, the detective had discovered a well-defined foot-print on the bank.

This he carefully measured, and then crossed the stream, to the point whence the missile had been hurled at him. There, he discovered another perfect foot-print, exactly like the former.

His doubts were all dispelled. It was Rodney Reed, and he was the assassin, and the safe-robber also.

He must be, still, in San Antonio.

Lyons determined to begin his work forthwith, and to work with a will.

But he must first attend the inquest, so he hastened back to the house. There, he found that a jury had been summoned, and were in attendance; Dr. Dare being present as well.

Much to his surprise, he beheld Miss Norrington, closely veiled, and leaning upon the arm of the doctor.

The examination commenced.

Nora gave her testimony in a clear voice, although it was evident to all that she was suffering greatly and was exercising wonderful self-control.

Her testimony created great surprise and wrought a complete revolution in the minds of those present. William Lyons, when sworn, created quite as much excitement. He related the result of his examination of the thicket and astounded all by showing the wound he had received in the same manner as that dealt to Clarence Coleman, as attested by Miss Norrington.

He stated that the foot-prints made in both cases were exactly alike. He also produced and read the note that had been written by Clarence, and left on his desk; also the one sent to the sheriff.

But they were doubly astonished when Lyons revealed the fact that after the murder of Norman Norrington, the assassin had gone at once to the office, and robbed the safe of all its valuable contents, leaving by mistake a key of his own manufacture in the safe-door. Thus, it was made clear that the miscreant had plotted to get rid of the father and lover of the maiden, deprive her of her wealth, and in that way have her at his mercy.

There was proof wanting, the detective admitted, which would without doubt be forthcoming; but the circumstantial evidence was strong—strong enough to hang Rodney Reed as high as Haman, and he called for a verdict in accordance with the evidence.

Even while Lyons spoke, his eyes fell upon a flask that lay partially hidden by a lounge.

He reached for it and read the label—"Old Otard. Put up by Bob Caille, Bull's Head."

"Gentlemen," said he, "the man who lies, cold and dead before you, was never known to drink intoxicating liquors. Neither was Clarence Coleman. Here I find a flask of brandy which has been but recently opened, the cork pried out, and the contents nearly all drunk."

"Had it been opened in this house, it would have been done with a cork-screw, and the liquor would not have been taken from the bot-

tle, but from a glass. I shall trace this flask up."

"Again, Mr. Coroner, I ask you to pass this stone, found in the murdered man's hand, around to the jurors. They will at once see that it has been only recently taken from the river-bed, for there is living and still moist moss adhering to it. You can all see, gentlemen, why that stone was placed in the dying man's hand."

"But the assassin lost sight of the fact that such missiles are not usually found in a gentleman's library, and certainly not, with flesh and living moss upon them."

"Gentlemen, I have no more to say. I go now to hunt the cowardly robber and murderer to earth. I mean Rodney Reed!"

Dr. Dare had conducted Nora from the library previous to the detective's testimony being given, for the poor maiden was trembling violently, and he feared she would faint.

The jury were not long in rendering their verdict. It was to the effect that "Norman Norrington came to his death by the hand of an assassin; who was, in the belief of the jury, one of the clerks of the murdered man, by name Rodney Reed."

Lyons immediately hastened up to town, and put a dozen trusty men in search of Reed.

He also dispatched a skilled scout, to trace up, and induced Clarence Coleman to return to San Antonio, and give evidence against his fellow clerk; promising him protection against any of the rabble, who might favor the latter.

The city was soon wild, once more, with the new and exciting turn affairs had taken.

Pedro Pernaes congratulated himself, upon having gotten his pard out of town; for, most certainly, he would have been captured, and hanged by the mob; as every dwelling in the place was thoroughly searched, and patrols stationed around in the suburbs.

It had been a fearful tax upon the nervous system of Nora Norrington, to be present at the inquest; but she bore up bravely, and the physician, after prescribing a sedative, took his leave.

The undertaker was then placed in charge of the corpse, and he prepared it for burial.

All was soon quiet—quiet almost as the dead—in the Norrington Mansion.

It was then, that Nita Nichols called, and bade a servant say to her young mistress, that she had something of great importance to communicate. Nora was much surprised, but directed that the young woman be admitted.

She could scarce think of anything important, that she could care to hear of now.

Most dark and hopeless did the future appear to the poor young girl.

When asked, if she would see a lady on urgent business, she had listlessly, and in an absent manner, bade her be shown up-stairs.

The servant opened the door for Nita to enter, and then retired.

Nora perceived that her visitor was a Mexican; for she walked forward, bent at her feet, and kissed her hand.

At once, Nora raised her upward, and pointed to a chair by her side, as she said:

"Do not kneel to me, my dear girl! What can I do for you? I see, by the lines of care on your face, that you are a sufferer, like myself."

"Yes, Miss Norrington," was the reply, sadly spoken; "and through the same monster, in the form of a man!"

"What do you mean, and what is your name?" asked Nora, hurriedly.

"My name," said the other, "is Nita Nichols, and I was born in San Antonio. I have known you by sight, for years, as I have Clarence Coleman. I have not intruded upon you, at this time, without good and sufficient reasons."

"Miss Norrington, I am a dishonored woman! Scorn me, if you must. It was different; one year ago. Too late, I have found out that Rodney Reed is a villain. He has broken the solemn promises that he made to me, and now I seek revenge. I have come to tell you, that it was he who murdered your father!"

"That is not all. With the aid of a Mexican, he robbed the safe in the bank. I can prove what I say. Clarence Coleman is as innocent of those crimes as you are."

"I believe you, my poor girl," answered Nora Norrington. "I do trust you can prove what you assert. The coroner's verdict is against Reed, but there are no direct proofs."

"I pity, and sympathize with you, Nita, from the bottom of my heart. But, you should see the sheriff and Mr. Lyons, as soon as possible. Will you go to them with your information?"

"Certainly, Miss Norrington. I shall leave no stone unturned to bring Rodney Reed to justice. But, pardon me if I ask whether you and Mr. Coleman are not lovers? It is not mere curiosity in me—I have a worthy motive in asking."

"Mr. Coleman and I are engaged," was the reply.

"But, neither of you had much thought of an early marriage?"

"I cannot say that we had, for my father was a very proud man, and Clarence equally so

in many respects. My poor father would, most probably, have had objections; but only on account of Mr. Coleman's want of means. He intended to go elsewhere and carve out a fortune, before asking for my hand.

"But all that is past, and it is I who am now far beneath Clarence. My home, and everything that is here must be sold, to satisfy the claims of those who left funds in the bank, and of which it has been robbed. But, let us speak no more on this subject.

"You have relieved my mind greatly, Nita, by this visit, and what you have told me; and I thank you more than I can express. If there is any one on earth, who needs relief of mind more than myself, I think they must go mad.

"My anxiety for the safety of Mr. Coleman, so unjustly accused, has somewhat counteracted, or controlled the anguish, grief, and horror, consequent upon my terribly sudden bereavement. I will not now ask you the nature of your proofs, as I really am not equal to listening much longer to matters in connection with the occurrences of the past most awful night."

"And I had not intended to add to the strain upon your mind, Miss Norrington, but to relieve it," returned Nita.

"I shall, at once, proceed to seek Mr. Lyons, and shall give him the proofs to which I have referred. May you be strengthened, Miss Norrington, to bear your sad affliction!"

Rising, as she spoke, Nita Nichols hastily drew her *rebozo* over her head.

"Thank you, Nita—I thank you very much for all that you have said. I hope, too, that you may have strength to bear patiently your own sad lot.

"It is terrible to think of the disgrace and misery that have been caused by that vile and hardened wretch. You must call and see me again, my poor girl. Anything that lies in my power to do shall be done for you, Nita. You have my sympathy and my prayers."

The Mexican woman strove to grasp Nora's hand and kiss it as before, while the tears streamed down her cheeks; but Nora impulsively stepped forward and placing her arms about Nita, embraced her.

Tremblingly Nita Nichols tottered to the door.

Fierce and revengeful as any of her mother's race, yet kindness and sympathy melted her; causing her proud form to bend and tremble, and her keen black eyes to be filled with tears.

She would have turned the world over, so to speak, for Nora Norrington after that brief interview.

Nora was much relieved and benefited by having seen Nita, and received such intelligence from her; for she believed the wronged woman spoke truly, and that she had, as she said, proofs positive against Rodney Reed.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PLANS OF PEDRO.

THE day that followed was one of great excitement to many who vainly sought for Rodney Reed throughout the city.

It was a day of torturing anxiety and bodily pain to Clarence Coleman, bound with lariats, and jested and cursed at by the Greasers, who stole into the thicket where he lay, under the guidance of Augustine.

There, in his presence, they talked boastfully of the robbery by "El Capitan Reed" and Pedro after the murder.

Clarence now felt that, regardless of his protestations, and his having sent the key of the safe, he would be thought the thief, for there was no other key, and even had there been, it would have been useless without the combination. Reed must have had a duplicate key, but in what way could he have become possessor of the combination; unless, indeed, he had heard him speak it that night when concealed in the office.

Little less tortured in mind was Rodney Reed, for, after awaking from a troubled slumber in the limestone ridge north of San Antonio, a Mexican, sent by Pedro Pinales, brought him information that caused him to foam at the mouth and rave like a maniac.

It was to the effect that the jury had found him guilty of the murder of Norman Norrington, and that Lyons had accused him of having robbed the safe.

The messenger reported that the citizens were howling for his blood, and searching high and low for him, and that Pedro had declared he would have been found and hanged had he remained in town. He cautioned him, therefore, to remain quietly where he was for the present, as the only safe course.

Reed now cursed himself bitterly. He could not account for having been such a fool in small matters. The leaving of the key in the safe, and the written warning of Clarence upon the floor; the burling of the stone at Lyons, and leaving the brandy-flask at the scene of his crime—such things had been idiotic, as he now saw them.

But it was easy to see mistakes, after they had been made.

It was now too late to remedy any one of them.

The die was cast!

He was a hunted outlaw, doomed, if caught, to an ignominious death; and, so wild and unnatural was the manner of the miscreant, and so fearful his curses, that even the ruffianly Mexican, who had been accustomed to villains and scenes of villainy all his life, crawled away from him and hid himself in a thicket.

A sad, sad day it was to poor Nora Norrington, with her murdered father's body in the room below her, and her lover she knew not where.

Lyons and Barnes were agreeably surprised, indeed, greatly rejoiced, at the visit of Nita Nichols; who delivered the bundle to them, which contained the clothing that had been worn by Rodney Reed when he murdered Norman Norrington.

These clothes were recognized by them as having been worn by Reed, and, as they were smeared with blood, they were the strongest evidence yet brought forward.

There was no more proof needed, however, after Nita had told her story; she repeating the words that she had heard pass between the accomplices, after the commission of the murder. But she said nothing about her having been present when Pedro returned from robbing the safe, or anything whatever in regard to it.

Lyons wrote the words of the young woman down, and having gained her promise to do all in her power, and to testify at the trial—should there be one—which, however, seemed doubtful, as it was believed that Reed could not be lodged in jail, if caught, as the people would almost certainly resort to lynch law.

After this agreement Nita returned home, to be surprised, and not a little alarmed, by the news that awaited her; her mother informing her that Pedro Pinales had just been there, but had not recognized her as the daughter of his old master in Mexico.

Nita was greatly frightened.

She felt that Pedro would not have called at the house unless he had in some manner ascertained that it had been she who was at the *jacal*, and who had taken the bloody clothing and the stolen treasure.

"What excuse did he make, mother," the girl asked, in much agitation, "for calling here? He must have traced me from the San Pedro. We are lost!"

"He asked for something to eat," demanded Mrs. Nichols, in her turn considerably alarmed, "saying that he was very hungry. But he did not appear to be, judging from the little he ate."

"Did you leave the room while he was here?"

This question was put very anxiously.

"Yes, Nita; I went to the kitchen for the food."

Nita clasped her hands, and looked wildly about the room. Then, as if recalling something, she darted to the head of the bed, and peered under it.

Uttering a cry of apprehension, she reached beneath the couch, and pulled out a small-sized top boot.

"We are lost!" she exclaimed. "Oh, my poor baby! That wretch will kill us all. Mother, there is but one of my boots here. Pedro Pinales has the other. He has seen my trail, on the bank of the creek, has found out that I have good reason to hate Rodney Reed, and has inferred that I am the one who has removed the treasure."

"To make sure of it, he has stolen my boot, to fit into the foot-prints that I made. But, he shall not win. I am going now, to tell Mr. Lyons. Then, the wretch will be captured, and we shall be safe."

"They are searching for him now. Lock the doors until I return. I must go at once!"

So saying, Nita Nichols ran from the *casa* into the street, and down the same to the Military Plaza. Thence, she hurried to the office of Sheriff Barnes, where she found Lyons and related her story; which was, this time, in connection with the safety of her mother, her child, and herself.

Lyons immediately sent two men to the hut, to arrest Pedro; and then, having assured Nita that she need fear no harm from the Mexican, she returned to her home.

The Greaser, however, was not one to be caught napping.

He reasoned that Nita would soon return, that she would be suspicious when she heard of his visit, and perhaps discover that the boot had been stolen.

That she would, should such be the case, at once inform the officers of his presence in San Antonio, he felt certain.

Now that he was positive who it was that had made off with their booty, he began to believe that Nita must have seen him at the *jacal*; and, if so, he was in great danger. Indeed, it appeared strange that his house had not already been visited and searched, for the purpose of arresting him.

Perhaps this had been done, though luckily for him, during his absence.

There was no need for him to spend more

than a moment or two in the vicinity of his *hovel*, to compare the foot-prints with the boot, which he had now in his possession.

There was little need for even this, as he was positive that the boot had been worn by Nita Nichols, and that it would fit into the foot-prints on the bank of the San Pedro.

So the Mexican argued, and he was correct. He escaped into the willows, just as the men sent by Lyons made their appearance.

No longer had he the slightest doubt in his mind, as to what had become of the gold. But he knew full well, that his future movements in the town must be very guarded and secret.

He must steal off to the *jacal* of one of the men, upon whom he knew he could depend, and on whom he had a hold; and send this man to collect some of the lawless Mexicans of the town, who, with well equipped horses, must rendezvous at some point among the mesquites, to the south of the city, as soon as darkness settled upon the earth.

Having accomplished this much, Pedro determined to seek the hiding-place of Red Reed, and there to form his plans for the night.

And, in the first place, he was bent upon recovering the treasure, which he was positive, Nita had secreted in or near her home.

This must be done at once, or the girl might deliver the booty up to the authorities.

The thought that she might have done so already, almost made the villain frantic.

He believed that Reed would kill Nita, if she should refuse to give up the gold to him.

It, therefore, would not be prudent to inform Reed of all his doubts having been removed in regard to the person who had taken the proceeds of the robbery, until darkness had set in; for the miscreant would be so furious and revengeful, that he would perhaps at once rush into San Antonio, and to the house of Nita, and thus be captured.

Red Reed was too desperate to be trusted with this important discovery, until the time arrived for them to act; and Pedro Pinales, after the unexpected disappointments that had already occurred, was resolved that he would have two strings to his bow, at this most important crisis.

He, therefore, obtained information of the movements of the three wealthy Mexicans, whom Augustine had reported to have arrived that day in the city for the purpose of purchasing cattle.

They must have a large sum of money in their possession, which would replace, to some extent, that which had been taken from the safe of Norman Norrington, should that be beyond recovery.

Nothing could be accomplished with the band of wandering and lawless Greasers, he intended to collect for "El Capitan Reed."

Pedro succeeded in doing all that he wished, in the way of gaining the desired information, and making arrangements for the meeting of the outlaw Mexicans, without exposing himself to the view of those who were in search of him.

Then, he proceeded on his way to join Red Reed.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BOND OF INIQUITY.

"So you've come at last, have you?" growled Red Reed, springing to his feet, as his yellow pard stole cautiously from the thickets, first giving the signal that had been agreed upon.

"Satan burn me, if I would have remained here in this rocky hole an hour longer, even if I had to go to San Antonio alone! It has been the longest day I ever passed, or ever will pass. Do you hear me, Pedro Pinales?"

It was a wild-looking place, and wild enough looked Rodney Reed, his eyes bloodshot, and his apparel torn and soiled. He appeared to have aged ten years within twenty-four hours.

"Pedro is here at last, Senor Capitan, and lucky he has been to get here. You have had a long day, you. Why did you not sleep? That brandy is bad for you. You will want steady nerves. San Antonio is wild to string you up to a limb!"

"May the fiends burn the last one of them! I don't care a snap of my finger for them!" returned Reed, scornfully. "I shall win the game and sweep the board. Just you wait. I'm as desperate as the devil, and twice as revengeful!"

"Sleep, did you say? Hear the fool talk! I never expect to sleep again until I pillow my head on the arm of Nora Norrington."

"You look as if you thought I was a little 'off,' but I never was more clear-headed in my life. Take a pull at the bottle, old pard. I shall owe everything to you, after all, and I will not forget it. I tell you, Pedro, you shall have Nita. She will just suit you. We can brain the brat, and take her along with us. *Viva la Mexico!*"

It was evident that Reed had been indulging quite freely, and this would never do. His brain must be clear during the next twelve hours, or all would be lost.

"I want no brandy," said Pedro decidedly; "and I advise you to let it alone. I tell you, they are howling for your blood in San Antonio, and every house has been searched. Give

that brandy-bottle a rest; I'll prepare you a cup of strong coffee. That will put your stomach and nerves in good condition.

"Pedro, you're a brick! I'll do as you say. Let them howl—what do I care? Some of them will give their last howl, if I get a chance to pop into them to-night.

"But is that all the news you have for me? You have been in town all day, and you must have carried out your programme, or a part of it. What have you accomplished? Have you any opening that will pay, where we can get gold before we leave?"

"I have worked hard, capitan, and have run great risks. Those three men who came from Mexico I have spotted. I know where they will sleep to-night. It must be their last sleep."

"You're right, Pedro. Their gold must be ours. But what of our missing treasure? Can we not recover it? Was it Nita Nichols who carried it?"

"If you promise to remain here, until I consider it safe to return to San Antonio, I'll tell you all that I know," said the Mexican.

"I promise, old boy. Fact is, I don't banker after a raw-hide necktie; and I don't intend to rush biz to any dangerous extent. Speak out!"

"I have but little to tell you, Senor Reed. I have collected a dozen good men. They will meet us in the mesquites, an hour after sunset mounted and equipped. Nita Nichols took the gold, but what she has done with it I do not know.

"She has been to see the Senorita Norrington to-day. One of my spies saw her. She has, of course, told her all that she knows. Perhaps she will take the gold there to-night. If she does, my man will be on the watch for her."

"The she fiend!" exclaimed Red Reed, in a fury. "How do you know that she stole it, Pedro?"

"I went to her casa, and stole her boot. It fitted the prints exactly, and the mud of the San Pedro was still upon it."

"I'll choke the life out of her this very night!" yelled Reed. "She shall give up the gold, and die whether she does or not!"

The wretch paced back and forth, his fists clinched, and he absolutely foaming at the mouth.

The Greaser, who had been sent as a messenger, hearing the voice of Pedro, crawled from his covert, and assisted in preparing the coffee; gazing, with no little apprehension, at the furious and nearly insane wretch.

"Capitan," said Pedro, reproachfully; "I have told you that I have found men—twelve men. I have found out who took the treasure, and also where those three Mexicans sleep to-night, and that they have much gold.

"I have worked hard, but you have no thanks. All you seem to care for, is yourself, and your revenge. You stay here, and get half drunk, while I risk my life all day in your interest; yet all you do, is to curse, and talk of having your revenge.

"I am more than half sick, for I have had no sleep. I do not like this business. I think by the way you talk, you can clean out San Antonio alone; and you may do so, for all Pedro cares!"

With a great show of indignation, the Greaser delivered this speech.

His patience was, in reality, exhausted; for he believed that Reed would be unfit for the desperate work of the coming night, through the liquor that he had drunk.

In truth, Pedro was afraid of his Texan pard; and he was surprised at himself after he had spoken, for having been able, in word and manner, to keep up his assumed indignation and exhibition of wounded feeling.

He had not, however, the slightest idea of abandoning his confederate.

The latter stood, riveted in his tracks, gazing at Pedro, in the very extreme of astonishment and concern.

He well knew that, not only his revenge, but the gold, indeed his very life, depended upon his yellow-skinned associate; and he was dumfounded, the more so because the Mexican had never before spoken in such a way to him.

As a matter of course, Pedro had always addressed Reed as a superior; but his manner and words, at this time, were those of an equal.

Considering the state of mind in which the miscreant was, it had been a dangerous speech for the Greaser to make; but the latter had come to the conclusion, that he might as well risk his life in that way, as in the company of a lunatic, in the desperate work that was before them. Besides this, he was watching every movement made by Reed, and he was prepared to get in a shot as quickly as the latter did, should his experiment turn out to be a life and death matter.

For full half a minute, Red Reed stood speechless. Then he strode forward, with his right hand extended; saying, in the most conciliating manner, and with an apologetic look:

"Pedro Pinales, you astonished me greatly by your words, at first; but, upon a moment's thought, I begin to feel that I deserve your in-

dignation, as much as you merit my thanks for your faithfulness to me to-day.

"I know, as you have truthfully said, it has been at the risk of your own life.

"Here's my hand! I have been selfish, I admit; but, bear with me, for I am nearly wild with the way in which everything has gone against us, and which I did not think possible.

"We are pards, you and I, I hope to the death! Let us sink, or swim, together. If I get a little wild and unreasonable now and then, excuse it; and consider how all my plans have been frustrated. I am a hunted outlaw, you tell me, and I believe you!

"But, I'll follow your advice in regard to the brandy, taking no more than is actually necessary; for I begin to see that, by drink, I am not only jeopardizing my own life, but the lives of my friends.

"Shake, pard Pedro! And now, let us have some coffee."

The Mexican at once extended his hand, with a look of gratification and pleasure; as near as his villainous face could express such feelings, and returned—

"With pleasure, capitan; and, if you continue to feel as your words have just expressed, I reckon we shall skin through to-night.

"Now that you seem to have regained your senses, I feel much relieved; for I tell you frankly, it will be no easy night for us. If we see to-morrow's sun without having accomplished half what we have laid out for ourselves, we'll be lucky men.

"We'll say no more, however, but drink our coffee; and then it will be time for us to be moving. I have three horses, fully equipped, near at hand; and we must make a half circle around the city, and a wide one at that."

"You're right again, Pedro. I begin to feel better already. Remember, we stick together, through thick and thin. If one goes under, both of us do. Now, all being understood, we'll win, or die trying!"

Silently, the trio partook of the evening meal, each busy with thoughts of the night's work ahead; which, after eating, was talked over.

Reed appeared rather more like himself, although his appearance was strikingly wild and desperate still.

After sunset, all three mounted their mustangs, and, keeping within the cover of the mesquites for some distance, until their forms could no longer be recognized, they proceeded to the rendezvous; meeting the twelve Greasers whom Pedro had hired, in the chaparral, south of the Alamo City. This had been previously arranged.

By that time, darkness had settled upon the earth; and the accomplishment of darker crimes ruled the brains of the "Crimson Coyotes," under the leadership of El Capitan Reed, the cowardly seducer, robber, and assassin!

CHAPTER XXII.

LESS HUMAN THAN BRUTES.

A MORE desperate party of villainous cut-throats than the "Crimson Coyotes," were probably never gotten together.

Nearly all of them were attired in tattered garments, they being mostly Mestizoes, or half-breeds, and the most vicious looking of their class that can be imagined. It was evident to Rodney Reed, at a glance, that they had been "night-birds," of the Alamo City for a time only; having come from the Rio Grande, and squandered all the money they had at monte, and in liquor.

Reed knew that, should it come to a fight, on a forced retreat toward the Rio Grande, those vagabonds would desert him, unless their pockets were lined with his gold. He realized the necessity of proving himself a liberal leader, and able to reward his followers; and his fury was intense against Nita Nichols, for having taken the vast fortune he had risked so much in obtaining.

As soon, therefore, as he had shaken the hand of each of those, who were to serve under his leadership, he bade Pedro to direct them all to remain as they were; keeping good watch, until he returned. Then, with his Mexican pard accompanying him, the pair proceeded as near as was possible to the casa of Mrs. Nichols, with the horses, and not betray their approach.

They then left the animals, secured to the mesquites, and crept, in a stealthy manner, toward the dwelling, approaching the same at the rear.

The treachery of Nita toward him greatly maddened Reed; for he had believed her to be utterly incapable of wronging him, in the least. The nearer he came to the house, in which he believed she was—and, as he hoped, the lost booty as well—the more his vile and vindictive nature was aroused.

"What shall we do to gain an entrance?" inquired Pedro.

"Smash in the door, if they don't open it! We must rush things, right on the jump. Come! Blood, revenge and gold; and then, for my beauty, Nora Norrington!"

Both darted, knives in hand, and revolvers slipped to the front on their belts, ready for use,

toward the rear door of the casa; but, without making the slightest noise.

The moon had not, as yet, risen; and, consequently, it was quite dark.

Beneath the closed window-shutters of the room in which Pedro had obtained the boot, shone a faint light from a burning candle.

The miscreants listened, but all was still.

"I'll bet my life, she's not inside!" hissed Red Reed; "she's gone again to the Norringtons. By the eternal, I'll strangle her!"

Pedro tapped lightly on the door.

There was no answer.

This served to increase Reed's fury.

Leaving against the side of the dwelling was a spade—the same that had been used by Nita and her mother, in burying the only bag of gold which the former had brought from the San Pedro. Thither, the girl was now making her way, for the remainder of the plunder. Had this not been so, the villains would have met a warm reception.

Mrs. Nichols had also left the casa, a moment after her daughter, to discuss with a neighbor the dread occurrence of the previous night.

When the door had been tried by Reed, and found barred, he uttered a terrible oath. Then, grasping the spade, he thrust it under the shutter, throwing his whole weight upon the handle.

Instantly the blind flew outward, disclosing the fact that there was neither sash nor glass.

There was no one within.

A candle was upon a table, burning; and a curse burst from the lips of Red Reed, as he caught a view of the sleeping babe.

Even Pedro was startled, when he saw the murderous expression on the wretch's face.

Could it be, thought the Mexican, that Reed would murder the innocent child—his own flesh and blood?

It seemed impossible.

Such an unnatural, inhuman crime could not possibly be thought of.

But the desperation and fury of the baffled villain, seemed to increase every moment.

He sprung inside, Pedro following him.

"Search every place in the accursed hole!" he cried. "Why, the fiends, is it that bad luck follows us? This speaks not well for the night. I was positive we'd find Nita here, and choke the truth out of her. She shall die, if I ever catch her. I'll prove to her that she can't play her tricks on Red Reed. She'll find proofs of my presence, when she returns!"

The wretch was now more like a madman than a sane being.

Rushing toward the bed, he caught up the child, and drew his sharp bowie quickly across the little white throat!

Pedro had detected the intention of his white pard; but, knowing that it would be useless to attempt to save the babe's life, he rushed into the next apartment, muttering, in horror:

"*Diablo! Mucho diablo capitan!*"

The superstitious Mexican, from that moment, believed that everything attempted by them would be a failure; that a curse would be put upon Red Reed, and all who were with him.

Even to that depraved Greaser, the crime was horrible—most horrible!

Not a hope of recovering the treasure did Pedro entertain after that terrible scene; the knife of the inhuman monster had nearly severed the head of the child from the body!

It was a sight, to cause one to regret having been created in the same form as such a fiend. Even, in his frantic fury, the monster had drawn down the spotless covering of the couch, and wiped his bowie-blade upon the sheet. He then placed the tiny body in a natural position, and drew up the bed-clothes, thus hiding all traces of blood, or death.

The face of the murderer was fearful to look upon. His teeth were clinched, and eyes fixed in a stony stare upon his fiendish work. But this was only for a moment.

Then, with a fiendish yell, he bounded backward; the cry, so unearthly, bringing his pard, in alarm, from the other apartment. What he beheld, was Red Reed, with bottle upturned, drinking as though his life depended upon it.

Pedro did not even glance toward the bed, or betray in any way that he was aware of the bellish crime that Reed had committed; for he felt sure that the murderer would become more excited, rendering it more dangerous to himself, did he make any show of his abhorrence of the dastard deed.

It appeared, as Reed shot a glance at Pedro, that the former was greatly relieved; for he undoubtedly thought his accomplice was not aware of what had transpired during his absence.

"I know what you would tell me," he cried out. "You have not found any trace of our gold. Here, drink; for the trail of blood will soon open. The Rio Grande cattle-buyers must furnish it, if our own does not turn up."

Pedro took the proffered bottle, and drank; for the recent monstrous crime of his confederate affected him strangely.

Well the Mexican knew that, for that crime, Red Reed would have to die by the hand of Nita Nichols, if by no other. She would follow the slayer of her babe, even to the ends of the earth, for her revenge.

Reed now seized the candle, and held it beneath the couch. Perceiving a raw hide, he flung it out, and a flat stone was revealed. He gave a cry of triumph, when he removed this, which covered the place in which Mrs. Nichols kept her little fortune. He crawled under the bed, Pedro following him.

Why did not the Fates ordain that Nita should, at this moment, arrive, and shoot the dastards before they could regain their feet?

Curses, most bitter, and ejaculations of rage and disappointment followed; for, as Red Reed threw the light of the candle into the hole, he saw that what he sought was not there.

There was, however, a goatskin bag; and the jingle of coin was heard, as Reed clutched it. But he knew it was, comparatively, a paltry sum; probably not more than two or three thousand dollars.

But the fact that this bag, which contained, undoubtedly, the marriage portion of Nita, was within this hiding-place, indicated that the vast fortune, which the girl had taken from the *jacal*, was not in the *casa*. Had it been, it would have been in that secret excavation beneath the bed; which had been considered safe, or the little fortune of Mrs. Nichols would not have been left there.

"Here is enough to divide among the boys, Pedro," said Red Reed; "but I verily believe they have given up our gold and stocks to the officers. If Nora has the boodle, however, we'll have it yet."

"It does me good to know I've got every cent that old mother Nichols had. She and Nita will be obliged to work for their bread now—curse them! But, come; there is no use wasting time here. On we go, for the cattle-buyers."

"We'll have gold yet, and a pile of it, I swear! Those Mexican rancheros, must never look again on the waters of the Rio Grande."

Placing the candle upon the table as he spoke, Reed took another drink.

"I am ready, *Senor Capitan*," said Pedro. "I agree with you, we must have gold. We have started the ball, and must keep it rolling. Come on! *Vamonos!*"

Extinguishing the light, both sprung out from the window; and, closing the shutter, they glided away through the darkness to their horses.

At once they mounted, and soon rejoined the main party of outlaws, who had been anxiously awaiting them.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BITTERNESS OF DEATH.

WHEN Red Reed and Pedro Pernaes reached their comrades, they found them seated around a small fire, smoking their cigarettes.

Reed dismounted and ran rapidly up to them, displaying triumphantly the bag of gold.

Had that villainous party of Greasers known that it was the blood of an innocent child that stained the hands of the man under whom they had volunteered, their remarks of satisfaction and commendation would not have been heard. But Pedro was not one to reveal anything which would detract from the admiration of the men for their leader. Indeed, he remained beside his horse.

"Call in the guards for a few minutes!" ordered Reed. "I want every one to understand that I mean business!"

The guards strode in at once, and their captain counted the gold, and divided it into as many equal portions as there were men: leaving himself and Pedro out, in the general division.

"Walk up, one at a time, and take a dose of my medicine!"

Thus he said, as he passed each Greaser his portion; they receiving the gold with muttered thanks, and ejaculations of pleasure.

"Guards, return to your posts!" was the next order. "Pedro, pick a man to go with us. We have a bigger and more risky job this trip."

Then Red Reed sprung into his saddle.

Waving his *sombrero*, he spurred away; Pedro, with a gesture, indicating a Mexican who should follow.

The three rode directly toward the San Pedro, where they left their horses, and proceeded up the creek, keeping within the shade of the willows. Past Pedro's *jacal* they went, little dreaming that their approach had been heard by Nita Nichols; who had just time to steal up into the branches of a large tree. As little dreamed they, that they were within three paces of several bags of gold—a fortune in themselves!

Nita was suspicious, and bent low in the branches, a muttered curse from Reed betraying to her his identity, and a low remark of Pedro telling the eager listener who he was also.

Red Reed was filled with fury, as the sight of the *jacal* recalled the loss of the Norrington wealth, which he had so long plotted to secure.

Nita was not only greatly amazed, but exceedingly concerned, upon making this discovery.

It seemed strange that, after the whole city had been searched so thoroughly for them during the day, here the two villains were; and near the very spot which one would suppose they would give a wide berth.

Surely, their mission must be a very important one; and what else could it be, unless the recovery of the proceeds of the robbery?

They must believe that she had given the treasure to Lyons or Barnes; and they were now, in their desperation, setting out to rob the dwellings of those men. Nita could think of no other reason for their presence at such a time. But, again she thought, they may be going to get together a gang of lawless Mexicans.

They might return, and probably would, and attack her home.

Since the disappearance, following the visit of Pedro Pernaes, she had expected this, until assured by Lyons that neither of the ruffians had been seen in the town—that they had undoubtedly fled toward Mexico.

Nita felt that she must return home at once. She already had as much of the gold as she could well burden herself with. But what mattered even that, when those at her home might be in danger? She would have left the treasure without a thought, but it belonged to Nora Norrington, who had been so terribly bereaved, and Nita's first thought was for her.

She sprung to the earth, hastily placing the bags of gold in a sack which she had brought for that purpose, and then throwing it with some difficulty over her shoulder, she stole down the San Pedro for a little distance, and then east toward her home. But more than once she was obliged to halt and rest, for the sack was very heavy.

Eventually she reached the house, approaching by the rear, and threw the sack down near where the bundle of papers had been buried. Then, without entering the house, she took the spade, dug a hole, and casting in the treasure, quickly covered it up with earth, smoothing the spot, and dragging some old fencing material to place over the newly disturbed earth. She then returned toward the *casa*.

She knew that she had made some noise, and thought it strange that her mother had not opened the shutter of the window and called to her, as she must have been anxiously expecting her.

Nita laid down the spade and raised her hand to tap on the door, but her arm fell to her side as if powerless, and she gasped for breath. For her life, she could not stir a finger for a full minute; and from gasping for breath, it seemed that all breath left her.

She tried to shriek aloud, but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth.

In her inmost heart, Nita Nichols was convinced that Rodney Reed and Pedro Pernaes had been there.

Had they slain her mother?

There was no sound within the *casa*.

So terrible was the short time to the young woman while she stood thus, that she suffered a thousand deaths. Indeed, she came very near falling senseless; but, by a superhuman effort, she threw off the oppressive dread that had taken possession of her, jerked the shutter open, and cried out:

"Mother! Oh, mother! Where are you?"

Scarcely had these words, to which there came no response, escaped her, when she perceived that the oaken bar had been broken, allowing free ingress.

Then, with a cry like that of some mortally wounded thing, the poor tortured girl dashed wildly within the house; again calling, in a voice to agonize any who had heard it, to her mother.

Yet, all was still as death in that apartment—death, and Egyptian-like darkness reigned there!

Who could even begin to imagine the emotions which tore to the very soul poor Nita Nichols, as she staggered to the match-box, and ignited a match; waiting until it threw out a bright flame—even that short time seeming an eternity to her?

But, as poor Nita gave one glance, a glance that was filled with the most fearful anticipation, around the room, the little blazing splinter dropped from her hand; and, with a wild shriek, she sunk upon the clay floor of the apartment. For, near the head of the couch, stretched upon the floor, lay her mother—ghastly as a corpse, and to all appearance dead!

Then followed a period of deathly stillness, a long period, before Nita, with a groan, recovered consciousness; she, then, being dazed, and for a time unable to recall what had occurred. But soon the near past flashed upon her mind, and she staggered to her feet, feeling and groping around, until again she held a lighted match in her hand.

She dared not look toward the bed, but instantly picked up the candle, which she discovered upon the floor by the side of her mother, who had without doubt let it fall from her hand. This gave the poor young woman hope that her mother might not be dead, as it appeared that she must have been carrying the light, had fainted, and dropped it as she fell.

Then, there were no signs of blood.

Instantly, upon lighting the candle, Nita stepped to the side of her prostrate mother, who was now her only anxiety.

A single glance had satisfied her that her child was in the same place in which she had left it, and was evidently sleeping.

So bewildered was Nita, however, that she could not reason upon some points.

She did not for a moment suspect that her mother's swoon had been caused by anything, except being terrified by those who had broken into the dwelling.

What else, indeed, could have caused it?

It did not occur to her that, having been unsuccessful in finding the lost booty for which they were in search, Rodney Reed and his yellow-skinned accomplice had murdered both her infant and her mother; although, when away on the San Pedro, and at other times since the boot had been stolen, this fear had troubled her.

But not now.

She dared not entertain such a belief, or thought, or suspicion, lest she should drop dead!

Quickly scanning her mother's face and form, and observing neither bruise, nor wound, nor blood, Nita placed her hand upon her parent's side, and, to her great relief and joy, felt a slight pulsation of the heart.

She was now fully satisfied that her mother had but fainted, although she had never known her to lose consciousness before.

It was probable that the miscreants had terrified the poor woman greatly—so her daughter thought—perhaps, even choked her, to force her to reveal the hiding-place, of which she knew nothing.

But, not for more than a brief moment, did Nita Nichols linger at the side of her mother, after ascertaining that life remained.

Then she sprung erect, and to the bedside; pulling, gently, the bed-clothes down from the face of her little one.

First, that corpse-like face—ay, really the face of a corpse—and then, oh, horror! that little white neck, with a terrible gash across it, and a gore of blood!

Fain would we draw the curtain.

No more corpse-like was the face of the murdered babe, than that of the mother. Nita stood, as rigid, as immovable, as if suddenly transformed to stone.

Her eyes were filled with a horror, and an anguish, that were unspeakable; fixed, in a stony stare, upon that awful sight. Her lips were parted, and colorless, and her face as white as the driven snow.

She remained thus but for a few seconds.

Then, that proud, much wronged and tortured girl fell, as a post falls, without the bend of a joint, or movement of a muscle, stiff and rigid, upon the hard clay floor—the candle becoming once more extinguished, as it dropped from her hand.

Not a sound left the lips of that agonized mother, as she fell.

And, there lay mother and daughter, as

silent and motionless as death, upon the floor of their once peaceful and happy home, now in darkness in every sense of the word; while, upon the bed, lay the murdered babe, presenting a sight that, when all the circumstances were considered, might well be veiled by darkness!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THREE TO THREE.

THE trio of Mexicans, who had come to San Antonio to purchase beeves, had rented a large apartment for a week. This room had thick wall-partitions on either side, and was provided with both a front and rear door.

This fact, Pedro Pernaes had ascertained.

The men had been much fatigued by their long ride from the Rio Grande, and had retired early.

Among those congregated in the vicinity, few had any idea that another tragedy had been committed since sunset, and fewer still dreamed that yet another was to be perpetrated within a few yards of them.

Yet all this was true. Red Reed, with Pedro, and the Greaser they had ordered to follow them, had made their way to the rear of the building in which the strangers were lodged, and were there secreted.

Their present object must be successfully carried through, or there was little hope of keeping the "Crimson Coyotes" long together, or loyal to their new leader. The gold of the cattle speculators must be gotten hold of at all hazards.

Even at that early hour, murder must be committed; and that, even within hearing of the voices of a conversing crowd!

Should there be the least alarm created, the three assassins felt sure that their retreat would be cut off, and they would be captured. They therefore proceeded in a stealthy manner.

They apprehended no little trouble in obtaining entrance to the building in which the rancheros slept. A great deal depended upon whether they should find the doors and window-shutters closed and barred.

Soon they reached the back entrance, their approach being concealed by the garden shrubbery.

The doors and windows were fastened!

Red Reed would have cursed aloud, if he had dared. What was to be done? Must they abandon the attempt? If so, they could not hope to keep together their organization more than a few days at the most.

Pedro, however, was always ready for any emergency.

Uncoiling a lariat from his waist, he tied a running noose; and, throwing the rope, caught the noose upon a projecting waterspout above his head. The next moment he was upon the roof. He knew that the Mexicans would leave the trap-door open, for the purpose of getting the cool air.

He was right. The trap was open.

Reaching down he found a movable ladder; and down it he went with the utmost caution and silence.

A tallow dip was burning, but very dimly, not having been snuffed for some time; and Pedro saw the three strangers, sleeping soundly upon the floor.

It was necessary that he should work quickly, for he was in a very perilous position.

Should one of the men awake, he would be shot before he could reach the roof again.

Treading noiselessly, the ruffian went to the rear door and removed the oaken bars. As the door swung open, the two who were without stole inside, each with a gleaming knife in his hand.

Pedro crept forward, performing in pantomime the work each must do; he snuffing the tallow dip, which then threw a brighter light around.

The sleepers were lying upon blankets, not having removed their clothing. Beneath the head of each was a pair of strong saddle-bags; and the cowardly assassins were positive as to their contents. Delay was not to be thought of. Each had been pointed out, by Pedro, the man he was to slay.

All three were men past middle age.

Their equipments lay near the front door, and Pedro passed a saddle-blanket to each of his pards.

Then all sunk upon their knees, each with

a blanket in his left hand, and a glittering knife in his right.

Directly over the hearts of the sleepers were poised the blades.

Directly over the mouths of the sleepers were held the blankets.

Pedro gave a quick glance at Reed, and his other confederate. That glance was the signal of caution and attention.

Then followed a warning hiss.

When that hiss grew in volume, and then suddenly ceased, the knives were to do their deadly work.

The hiss broke in upon the heavy breathing of the sleepers—the sleepers, who were doomed to awake, only to gasp out their last breath!

The signal came, the bright blades were plunged, and the blankets thrown over the mouths of the unfortunate men. Then the knives were quickly jerked out from the breasts, to allow the life blood to flow, and hasten death; the weapons being instantly dropped, and the right hands of the assassins brought to the assistance of the left, to prevent any outcry.

It was a horrible scene!

Three murderers, each upon his victim, their limbs interlocked; the dying men gasping and gurgling, while the blood spurted from their gaping wounds, upon the assassins, and upon the floor.

But this awful scene was of short duration.

The struggles of the three men became feebler, and the pools of blood beside them larger; then all motion ceased, after the death-rattles sounded, almost simultaneously, from their throats.

"Buena!" burst from the lips of Pedro, as he cast aside the blanket, clutched his knife, wiped the blood from the blade, and returned the weapon to its sheath.

He looked cautiously around him.

The door, by which they had entered, had been left open, to facilitate their escape.

In a low, but deep voice, the villain gave the word.

"Vamonos!"

Instantly he jerked the saddle-bags from beneath the head of his victim, having first examined the corpse for money. The belt, and also the pockets, had been searched for valuables.

The belt of arms lay beside the saddle-bags. It consisted, in each case, of revolver and knife.

These the assassins buckled about their own waists.

The saddle-bags were soon examined.

There was no look of disappointment on any of their faces.

"Buena!" said Pedro, with a hideous grin.

"You're right, pard," returned Red Reed; plenty of *oro*, old boy; about all I care to pack. We did it nobly!

"But, we must get up and dust. No use lingering here, and considerable danger. This was a lucky break, and we've swept the board.

"I reckon we'll take better care of this boodle than the other. Come on! Levant's the word. Curse me if those fellows didn't die hard!"

"Hu-s-sh!" came from Pedro, as he extinguished the candle.

They could all hear the approach of some one through the shrubbery.

It was evidently a man who roomed somewhere in the row of buildings, and who seemed to be under the influence of liquor.

However, he was making direct for the open door.

All stood aghast for a moment.

Then Pedro sprung forward, and closing the door, replaced the bars.

He then whispered:

"Come! We must go up the ladder, and get down to the street by the lariat. But, I believe, we will have to kill that man!"

In another minute all three were upon the roof, and were peering over.

Pedro passed the saddle-bags to Reed, and gave a low hiss of caution, at the same time drawing his knife.

Whoever the man was, he staggered up to the rear door of the apartment they had just left, raised his fist, and gave it a blow.

"Open, o—"

The second word never left the stranger's lips.

It was as if he had knocked at the door of death, and it had opened immediately at his bidding; for Pedro Pernaes sprung at once upon the top of the outer wall, which projected two and a half feet above the flat roof, and then shot downward.

His heavy-booted feet struck upon the head of the stranger, and felled him senseless to the earth.

The next instant the knife of the outlaw Greaser was buried in the man's breast!

Drunk or sober, the stranger's curiosity had cost him his life.

The two villains upon the roof paused no longer. Red Reed and his companion jumped, at the risk of sprain or broken bones.

Both landed unharmed, as Pedro, after despoiling his last victim of the few valuables he had on his person, joined them.

He then relieved his captain of the saddle-bags he had passed him while on the roof; and all conscious of the necessity for silence, caution and speed, darted off through the shrubbery.

Soon they reached an unfrequented side street down which they passed, within a stone's throw of a crowd, who were still discussing the tragic affair of the previous night, and little dreaming that another had just been enacted, and so near them. But the villainous perpetrators of it passed them unobserved, being screened by the darkness.

Ere long they again struck south and into the Military Plaza, crossing the same diagonally, and passing out from the square at the southwest corner. This, in a very short time, brought them to the San Pedro, down which they sped until they reached their horses, when they mounted and hastened to join the band of lawless Mexicans, awaiting them in the mesquite chaparral.

Red Reed began to believe that the tide had turned, and he was jubilant accordingly; but Pedro, in spite of this latest success, in his own mind was anything but exultant.

He had before him the monstrous crime he had seen perpetrated earlier in the evening, by the captain of the "Crimson Coyotes."

CHAPTER XXV.

WATCHING WITH THE DEAD.

AFTER the departure of Nita Nichols, Nora Norrington felt that she must die if she did not bring her mind to bear upon some other subject than her own troubles, even in a slight degree. She therefore sent a servant to her dressmaker, requesting the latter to come, and bring with her everything that was necessary for a mourning outfit.

Mr. Lyons had sent her word that he would take charge of all outside affairs for the present.

Indeed, there was no lack of aid and sympathy. Dr. Dare had been an intimate friend of Norman Norrington, and his attention to the daughter of the murdered man was paternal in its character.

The consequence was that Nora found little to occupy herself with, except preparations for her father's funeral. Female friends had offered to keep the orphan company, but she preferred being alone with her dead.

The detective had given the poor girl grounds for hoping that Clarence Coleman would be found by the scout whom he had sent out to seek him, and that he would be present at the funeral.

But, after having been informed by Lyons, that the whole city had been searched, and that no trace of Rodney Reed had been discovered, Nora feared that the assassin might have gone in pursuit of his rival with hired cut-throats, and that Clarence would be killed.

So throughout the day the maiden's anxiety increased, and night drew near, bringing with it no tidings of her unfortunate lover.

She pictured him to herself in every conceivable kind of danger, or as lying dead upon the prairie, with wolves howling around him. Again, she imagined she beheld him, riding amid the cool shades, seeking some favorable place of security, where he could rest, and sleep off his fatigue; and next, a horde of villains darting upon him, and bearing him to earth, binding him fast. The climax to all this would be, seeing, in her fancy, Rodney Reed exulting over the man whom he had in his power.

So vivid were these mind-pictures, that they tortured the brain of Nora Norrington

almost as much as if she had gazed upon them in reality.

But, time passed, and the sun sunk in the West.

The kind old negro cook prevailed upon her young mistress to take some refreshment. But they seemed tasteless to the poor girl, whose despondency deepened, as the shadows of night fell upon the earth; and grew deeper yet, when she found herself robed in the sable suit she had ordered.

The mansion was now closed and the doors locked; but the windows of the parlor, within which was the corpse, opened upon the front veranda, and were raised to allow free ventilation.

The thick damask curtains, however, were closed, and the apartment was illumined by four wax-candles; which light, as the coffin was open, caused the corpse of the old banker to appear more like an image of wax than what it was.

Although old "Uncle Jake," the faithful negro servant, had volunteered to watch with the body, it was a most terrible task to him; for, he was as superstitious as his race generally are. But, for all that, Jake wished to be able to say, with pride and boasting, that he had "bin wid ole Mars' Norman froo de las' night what he war on dis hyer yearth."

It would serve as something for him to brag about, as long as he lived; being a proof of his bravery, and also of his love and respect for the old banker.

He could look down, in the future, with a consciousness of superiority, upon the other servants, who would not fail to regard him with awe, and great respect.

Uncle Jake had thought long upon the subject, before he came to the conclusion that he would brave the "spooks," which, very possibly, might have a silent fandango around the coffin; but he resolved to keep as far as he could from the corpse, and near to an open rear window, through which he could beat a hasty retreat, in case things got "too hot" for him, and he could not "stand the rifle."

Sober second thought, however, caused old Jake to change his plan somewhat; for, it occurred to him, that the ghosts might enter at the very window from which he proposed to make his escape, and so terrify him, and chill his old blood, that he would be incapable of flight.

Consequently, he seated himself upon the floor, with his back to the wall, between the two rear windows; and braced his nerves by a stiff horn of whisky, from a flask which he had the forethought to provide.

Thus it was that the old wrinkled negro, with his snow-crowned head, seated himself in a position which placed him under the necessity of looking upon the coffin continuously; he, at times, refraining from winking for so long a time—depriving his eyes of the natural lubricating moisture—that objects danced and quivered before him, and at times filled him with terror.

Articles of furniture assumed fantastic shapes, and seemed to be imbued with life, while Uncle Jake afterward repeated several times:

"I hopes I may die ef ole mars' didn't raise up in de box an' peep 'roun' de room! Den, 'pearin' ter think he'd jist stay whar he war an' git shed o' 'arthly troubles, he'd flop back ag'in!"

Upon these occasions, Uncle Jake's wool seemed to squirm like scorched snakes, his blood to become cold and cease circulation, and his muscles powerless, thus forcing him to remain where he was.

Time passed, old Jake becoming more and more frightened, indeed terrified; and from this fear and superstitious horror, and from sitting so long in the same position, he became stiff in his joints. He was deprived of the power even to speak or yell had the corpse really sprung from the coffin and attacked him.

So it was that the old negro was of no more service as a watch or guard than one of the marble statues on the mantle, which seemed to have become instilled with life and to be pointing their fingers in scorn at the charcoal image in front of them.

Singularly startling and terrifying transformations of scene occurred rapidly before the disordered vision of the old servant, and he dared not move a finger, even to brace

himself by a "pull" at his whisky-bottle, lest the whole world would go to smash, and in the general demolition of things he would be forced to close companionship with the cold corpse of his old master in the final collapse.

Meanwhile, Nora Norrington paced slowly back and forth across her chamber, her beautiful eyes fixed upon the carpet before her as she glided ghost-like, her naturally angelic face more seraphic still from its pallor. Her lips that, but a few hours before, rivaled the ruby were now almost colorless, while her features bore plain traces of the anguish, apprehension, anxiety and horror that had been hers, through the awful experiences that had been crowded into the last twenty-four hours.

Nora Norrington was the perfect personification of mute suffering; her drooping head, ghastly face, and broken, hopeless expression, with the senile twitching of her fingers and the dull gleam of her eye, made up a sight that was full of silent pathos.

She was, at times, ruled entirely by thoughts of her dead father, banishing all consideration of her absent lover, as a daughterly duty to him who was, on the morrow, to be laid in the earth, from her sight, forever.

All the thousand and one acts of kindness extended to her since her infancy, were recalled, and magnified in his favor.

Ever cold, reserved, and even stern, to others, he had been tender, affectionate, and considerate with her—granting her every reasonable wish and desire.

Since death had claimed her mother, he had tried faithfully to fill both places.

Nora could not fully realize that he was dead; gone from her life forever, stricken by an assassin, by one whom he had trusted and favored; stabbed in a cowardly manner, in his own home; dead, his lips motionless for all time, without a word of farewell, without time to pray, or even to cry out for help, when the cruel steel pierced his breast!

It was dreadful—too dreadful; and poor Nora shuddered, her blood chilled, as she thought of his cold and silent corpse, now lying coiled in the room below her.

She would go to him!

Her place was with him, beside the casket in which they had placed him, on this, his last night upon earth.

This was her duty.

Why had she not thought of this before?

Her tears had refused to flow, so intense had been the bitter anguish of her heart since darkness had enveloped the earth—a darkness that was typical of the death that had claimed her father, and of the almost hopeless despair that at times ruled her entire being.

In the same slow, unearthly glide, with downcast gaze, her arms hanging listlessly, and her white hands clasped before her—thus she stole noiselessly down the stairway, leaving the door of her room open to partially light the hall.

The parlor door was open, and Nora entered the room without the slightest noise, and glided to the side of the coffin.

Poor old Uncle Jake, who had not seen his young mistress since her great bereavement, and had not thought of her in sable robes, really believed that a ghost—a genuine, *bona fide* visitant from the unknown world—was before him.

There he sat, between the windows, the most terrified man on earth; his tongue glued to the roof of his mouth, his eyes starting, and fixed upon the supposed specter!

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ABDUCTION.

THE marble silence of that dead face was awful for Nora to look upon.

Slowly her head bent, and the unconfined wealth of her sunny tresses fell upon the breast, and mingled with the gray locks of the dead. Then, slowly the form of the maiden arose to an erect posture, her hands unclasped, and with her fingers she smoothed, gently and lovingly, the gray locks of her dead parent.

She dared not think of that cruel wound, now hidden by the vestments of the grave.

She dared not think of the horrible sight

that had greeted her gaze, when she first recovered consciousness, and found herself bound to her chair. She dared not dwell upon these, for she feared the mere thought would drive her mad.

As she now stood, she presented a most impressive picture; indeed, there could be few imagined that could be more impressive.

While she stood thus, the damask curtains were slightly agitated, and then slowly held aside, revealing the swarthy and demoniacal face of none other than Rodney Reed; whose hands, now holding those curtains, were red with innocent blood!

There lay the man he had murdered in so dastardly a manner—the man, who had taken him into his confidence when he had friends—there lay his victim, prepared for the grave!

And, beside that coffin, stood the bereaved daughter; pale, nearly, as the one who lay within it.

Gazing upon both, was Red Reed!

Truly it seemed that the Evil One had sent his favorite fiend to crush the flower, even as the parent stem had been crushed.

And poor old Uncle Jake saw that terrible face, and those blood-stained hands, and recognized at once the murderer of his master!

This was a real, tangible danger; and the old negro, fully believing that Red Reed would murder him, crawled silently out from the window, over the veranda floor, and threw himself headlong into the garden. There, he darted within a clump of shrubbery, and lay panting and exhausted with fear and horror.

Red Reed remained but a moment at the window.

With a stealthy movement, he passed inside, and stole toward Nora and the coiled corpse. Not the slightest sound betrayed his approach—the thick, soft carpet thus favoring him.

He reached the side of the coffin, and stood within a pace of the now kneeling maiden.

It was a sight to melt a heart of stone; yet only the most fiendish glee was expressed in the demon's face.

Then came an act, in accordance with the inhuman character of the monster.

Quickly he clutched the hands of the dead, and forced the stiffened arms to bend upward; and pressing the hands over the face of the corpse. He then stepped back, behind Nora, whose mind being concentrated upon her condition, heard not the slight movements, made by the monster. But, it was a wonder she did not feel the horrible presence of her father's murderer, and her own would-be destroyer.

The clasped hands of Nora slowly descended to their former position; then her head lowered and sunk upon her breast, and her heavy eyelids slowly unclosed.

Not slow, however, was the transformation of the emotions and expressions of the poor girl's mind and face.

Like a flash, her head was lifted from her breast, her lips parted, her eyes started from their sockets in dumfounded horror and instinctively she stepped backward.

Who can conceive—even approach in imagination—the horror, the chilling dread, the nameless emotions that ruled the hapless maiden at that moment?

When last she had looked upon her father's corpse, his hands were clasped upon his breast; but now, when she opened her eyes, they were covering the dead face!

Although it was an absurdity, an impossibility, yet she had no time to thus reason. Nora thought that her father must have returned to life—that he had not been really dead—and she sprang forward and clasped her hands about his wrists; but on the instant, she started back, for they were stiff and cold.

She strove to cry out, but only a gasping sound was the result. She knew that the hands and arms of the dead had been moved; and, as a matter of course, not by the corpse itself.

There was no one in the room but herself, and she had not laid her hands upon the still form in the casket.

As these thoughts came instantly into the poor girl's mind, she shuddered in every nerve. All the superstitions—from which no human being on earth is entirely free—of her

nature were forced to the front, and she was horrified.

Her nerves were, however, very sensitive, and she at once became conscious of another presence in the apartment; indeed, she was firmly convinced that she was not alone, but beyond the startling fact of the changed position of the hands of the dead, she could have given no reason for thus believing.

Not only did Nora Norrington believe that there was some one else in the room; but she felt that it was some one whom she would dread to see; yet, as before, she could not have given any reason for thinking it.

She recalled the circumstance of Uncle Jake's having asked to be permitted to watch with the corpse, yet she had seen nothing of the old negro.

Nora was positive, for all that, that old Jake had not even gone near the coffin.

He would not have dared.

Besides, had he been in the apartment when she entered, he would surely have made his presence known.

She glanced quickly and sharply on every side.

What influence, most subtle and incomprehensible was it, that caused her to dread turning about, and gazing behind her?

Who can answer?

But, turn she must, and she strove to do so; but a nameless dread paralyzed her, for which she could not account, and which she could not at once overcome. Every muscle in her frame seemed rigid and powerless, and even circulation seemed to have ceased for the time, while she could not draw a breath, her very jaws being locked. So intense, however, were these feelings, that she felt she must either move or fall dead; and, by a herculean effort, she recovered herself, and turned half-about.

Turned, but to stagger backward against the coffin of her murdered father, at which she clutched for support; her long tresses veiling the face and hands of the corpse from view!

The marvel was that Nora did not fall dead with fear and horror, for there, within three paces of her, stood her sire's assassin, Rodney Reed!

No other sight, no other human being, not even a war-painted Apache Indian, could have caused such repulsion and terror.

There stood the demon dastard, his swarthy face lit up with the most hellish triumph, and his hands stained with the blood of his latest victim!

Instantly and naturally the thought came into Nora's mind, that the cowardly miscreant before her had slain Clarence Coleman—that the blood now upon his hands was the blood of her lover!

"Father in heaven, save me! Oh, save me!" was the poor maiden's mental prayer.

As before, she was unable to shriek.

She almost doubted her senses.

Was she not gazing upon some specter, in a horrible dream?

Was she really awake, or in a fearful nightmare?

Such was the state of Nora's mind, rendered so unnatural by acute mental sufferings, that it was no wonder she could not take in the full horrors of her surroundings.

With a devilishly exultant laugh, Red Reed cried out, as he darted toward her, with his blood-smeared hands extended:

"Mine, mine at last, Nora Norrington! Remember my oath. Hal ha! I've won the game, and swept the board!"

Not until the horribly repulsive hands, the hands that had plunged the knife into her father's breast, clutched her arms—not until then did Nora regain the power of speech. She gave a piercing cry of fear and horror, that sounded through the quiet rooms of the mansion with terrific force, and then out into the night, echoing strangely within the shades of the adjacent bottom-timber.

"Yell away, my beauty, but it will do no good! Satan burn me if I don't get away with you, or leave my perforated carcass here and yours too!"

Thus hissed Red Reed triumphantly, as he clasped his left arm about the waist of Nora, and then, one by one, jerked the wax candles from the candlesticks and hurled them right and left upon the carpet.

Then he sprang through the window, and across the floor of the veranda; bounding into the saddle—his horse having been held

by a Mexican, while a dozen other Greasers sat their steeds close at hand, Pedro Pinales at their head.

"Hell and fury!" yelled the wretch. "I've won the last trick! Spur, boys—spur for your lives! Lead on, Pedro, for the bloodhounds of the law will soon be in chase!"

"*Bueno! Vamonos!*" were the answering cries of his yellow-skinned confederate; and on they all thundered, into the mesquites, Nora Norrington hanging limp and senseless over the arm of her father's murderer!

CHAPTER XXVII.

ON, TO THE RESCUE!

THE shriek shot out by poor Nora as Red Reed clutched her, awoke every servant in the mansion; the tragedy of the previous night having caused their sleep to be less sound than usual.

Filled with fright and amazement, they rushed out, old Jake crawling from his place of concealment, and sprung upon the veranda.

Since he had been lurking in the shrubbery, Uncle Jake had decided that he was the biggest fool and coward in Texas; for, it was evident to him now, that the ghost he had seen was none other than his young mistress who had come from her own apartment to watch for a time beside the dead.

When the negroes saw that the carpet was on fire in the parlor, it having been ignited by the candles which Reed had hurled to the floor, they rushed for buckets of water to extinguish it; but, seeing the hands of the corpse, as they now were over the face in an apparently natural manner, they dropped their buckets, and ran as though Satan himself was pursuing them.

It so happened that Will Lyons was on his way to confer with Miss Norrington—as he believed she would not sleep that night—when he heard the cry of that young lady; and he drove spurs and galloped toward the house. As he drew near, he was amazed at the commotion, considering the hour, and the recent awful event.

Spurring up to the front veranda, Lyons sprung from his horse and ran into the dwelling, the hall doors having been thrown open by the terrified negroes.

He knew, at a glance, that something serious had occurred; and realizing that it would be a loss of time to question the servants, he started toward the entrance to the parlor, through which shone a faint light, and from which smoke was pouring. The thick curtains had prevented him from observing this light on the outside, to a sufficient extent to alarm him. But, upon reaching the parlor door, the cause was apparent.

At several points, the carpets were in a bright blaze; the upper part of the room being filled with smoke, which poured out over his head, and nearly suffocated him. The central portion of the scene, was the coffin, resting upon chairs; and the detective at once, notwithstanding the confusion and excitement, perceived the strange position of the hands and arms of the corpse of the old banker.

However, he was not one to allow himself to lose his presence of mind.

Some of the buckets of water, that had been brought by the negroes, had not been overturned, but were still standing near. Yelling to the servants, to return to his assistance, Lyons grasped one after another of the pails that remained full, and cast the contents where they would do the most good.

The manner, actions, and words of Will, reassured the darkies, and they hastened to help him; although their faces were now ashen with superstitious terror, and nothing would have induced them to again enter the parlor where their master's body lay.

The orders of Lyons were given promptly. The curtains were torn from the windows, at front and rear, the carpets deluged with water, and the smoke poured out in thick clouds; the fire being extinguished, leaving all in total darkness.

Lights were soon brought, however; and Lyons, placing some of them in brackets in the parlor, lit up the apartment, which now presented a strange scene.

The costly carpets were burned, at several points to the floor; leaving irregular black spaces from which smoke still arose. But

this was soon stopped; and, a light breeze having sprung up, it was driven from the room by the draft.

Lyons had refrained from causing more noise or confusion than was absolutely necessary, lest he should alarm Nora; but, turned as he at length, and looked toward the group on the stairway, he saw that the youthful mistress of the mansion was not there. This surprised him greatly, and he became much alarmed.

Surely, he thought, there must have been, before his arrival, noise enough to have awakened the maiden; even had she been in a deep slumber, which he thought doubtful.

"Run up to your mistress's chamber, and see if she is asleep, auntie. Quick now!"

Thus he called out to the old cook.

Then, turning to the other negroes, he continued:

"Speak out, some of you, and explain these strange doings! In the name of wonder, how came the carpet to be on fire, and who has been changing the position of the corpse?"

"We-uns doesn't know 'bout dis hyer business, Mars' Lyons. We's bin sleepin'."

Thus answered one of the men in a hushed voice, after waiting in vain for some one else to speak.

At this moment Uncle Jake, who had upon reflection somewhat changed his programme of operations, crawled into the hall from the rear gardens. Soon he was the center of observation, for all knew he had acted as death-watch.

Recalling this fact, the detective at once commanded:

"Tell your story quick, Uncle Jake! Explain the cause of the fire, and everything that you know about it!"

"Dat debil, Reed, he done bin hyer, mars'. He's de man what's did hit. He done frowed me outen de winder. I's all broke up—I is, sure!"

Hardly were the words out of Jake's mouth when the old cook rushed down the stairs, her face betraying every sign of terror. She strove in vain to articulate.

"Speak, auntie!" demanded Lyons. "If Miss Nora is gone, as I fear she is, say so at once. Speak out, I say!"

"She's done gone, sure an' sartain, Mars' Lyons! Her bed ain't bin mussed a bit. I's mighty sure dat vilyun what kill ole mars' hes done bin hyer ag'in!"

The negroes, by this time, had all huddled together in their fright.

"Search the house—search every room!" yelled Lyons, now almost beside himself.

The servants started in every direction.

It did not seem possible that the cowardly assassin would have dared again enter the home that he had made desolate, yet the detective was forced to believe that such had indeed been the case.

Who else would have set the house on fire at such a time?

Certainly no one.

But where was Nora?

Could she have been in the parlor and have been abducted by the dastard?

It seemed the only solution of the mystery of the young girl's absence.

Should she not be found in or about the mansion, he would know positively that the unfortunate bereaved maiden was now in the power of her father's murderer.

This was terrible even to think of.

Then it flashed upon the mind of Lyons that he had noticed a change in the position of the hands and arms of the dead banker, although so excited and dumfounded had he been that he could not decide whether he had imagined this or not, and he now stepped to the side of the coffin.

He found that he had not been mistaken. The hands, which had been clasped over the breast, were now covering the face of the dead.

Lyons knew very well that, even had Nora been down, to look again upon her father's face, she never would have thus changed the position of his hands in the coffin.

It was simply preposterous to imagine such a thing.

None but the miscreant, Red Reed, had done it!

None but the assassin had spirited away poor Nora Norrington!

Lyons knew not which way to turn or go.

It was, throughout, the most amazing chain of events that had ever been known to him.

Then the howls and wails of the negroes fell upon his ear. Well he knew that their young mistress had not been found.

Not a doubt remained in his mind.

Nora Norrington had been abducted by Rodney Reed.

Having come to this conclusion, Lyons decided to gallop back to town, and at once organize a pursuing-party; although he feared there was little chance of rescuing Nora, believing that the poor girl was doomed to the worst possible of fates!

Shutting up the parlor, both doors and windows, William Lyons ordered the servants to keep close watch around the house until the morning. Then he sprung into his saddle, and spurred rapidly toward the city.

No sooner had he reached the Main Plaza, than he discovered crowds of people rushing into and across the square. At the same time, a horseman galloped toward him.

This was Barnes, the sheriff.

"Hallo, Lyons!" he called out wildly; "there has been the very devil to pay! Four men have been murdered within the last two hours, but the corpses were discovered but a few minutes ago."

"Lije Long went to his room, drunk, and one of his pards followed, to ascertain if he had gotten there all safe, but he found him dead. He had been stabbed to the heart, at the rear door of the house where those three Mexican cattle-buyers put up."

"The boys knocked, but getting no answer, they burst in the door, and found all three murdered, and their saddle-bags gone! What the deuce is to be done?"

"Don't ask me, Barnes! I'm off my cabase now. I have bad news also. Red Reed has been in town, fired the Norrington house, and carried off Miss Nora!"

"Great heavens! The scoundrel must have a crowd of cut-throats with him. It was his gang, then, that murdered Lije and the Mexicans. What a fiend he is!"

"Come on, Bob! There is no use in talking. We must raise a crowd at once, and go in pursuit. Miss Nora must be saved, if we follow the miscreant into Mexico. You're with me, of course?"

"To be sure, Bill. We'll find volunteers enough in the crowd yonder."

In two minutes Barnes and Lyons were on the borders of the surging throng.

"Gentlemen!" yelled the latter, "we want volunteers at once, to pursue Red Reed. His gang murdered these men, and set fire to Norrington's house since then."

"More than that, gentlemen; Red Reed has carried off Nora Norrington, the daughter of the man he murdered last night!"

"Shall he escape our vengeance?"

"Shall he, the vilest, most cowardly, most depraved assassin, robber and abductor, escape the lariat that we have noosed for him?"

"Shall he drag a beautiful young girl from the coffin of her father—that father having been laid low by his murderous blade and we let him escape us?"

"No! I answer, a thousand times, no!"

"To horse! We start to-night—yes, on the instant. We must hunt the infernal fiend to earth!"

"An Apache brave is far above him in mercy and humanity!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ONE MORE AVENGER.

A LOUD yell from the crowd greeted the appeal of Lyons, the detective.

They recalled the fact that Norman Norrington had befriended and trusted Rodney Reed, when the latter arrived, a stranger, in San Antonio, and that he had paid for his confidence with his life. They had, therefore, little difficulty in believing Reed to be guilty of the latest crime that had been imputed to him.

There were no lack of volunteers to hunt the villain to earth; but Lyons knew that a small party would be more likely to be successful than a large number, who would only create confusion.

He knew thoroughly the men who made up the crowd before him, and from them he selected a dozen skilled prairie rangers; calling them off by name, and bidding them get their horses equipped at once, and join him. These

men were in San Antonio merely temporarily, all residing on ranches leagues from the city.

All were well armed.

Soon, one by one, or in pairs, they galloped into the street.

Meanwhile, Lyons and Barnes viewed the corpses of the three Mexicans and the Texan.

The lariat that had been used by Pedro Pinales to gain the roof, still hung from the water-spout, and this was detached by one of the crowd, and passed to the detective. It was believed that the murdered men had had a large sum of money with them. This would be found upon the assassins when they were captured, and in the same saddle-bags which the unfortunate men had brought with them from beyond the Rio Grande.

All were now furious for the capture of Red Reed and his confederates in crime. Indeed, they would have torn them limb from limb, had the miscreants been brought before them.

The murder of the old banker, the setting on fire of his house, the desecration of his corpse, and the abduction of his daughters, had been sufficient to transform those who were collected on the streets and plazas into a wild mob; and that, without their giving more than a thought to the assassination of the other four men.

As is generally the case at such times, the people were drawn from the victims they had viewed, to rush toward the Norrington mansion, impelled by a strong desire to visit the last place at which Red Reed was known to have been.

The mob was uncontrollable, and rushed on, in the rear of Lyons and his mounted men, into the Main Plaza.

By this time the moon had arisen, and was shining brightly; and, as the horsemen, with the mad crowd behind them, entered the Plaza, piercing shrieks came from the opposite side of the square. Then, out rushed a woman, seemingly frantic with grief or terror.

Her cries were almost continuous.

Her long hair flew wildly behind her, and her hands were pressed upon her forehead.

"In Heaven's name, what else has happened?" exclaimed Lyons. "Barnes, who is she?"

"That is the mother of Nita Nichols, or I am greatly mistaken," was the reply. "She appears to have become insane."

"Great Crockett! I believe you're right. Here she comes, as mad as a March hare!"

Directly toward the mounted Texans ran the shrieking woman, her eyes directed straight at Lyons, and filled with a horror unspeakable.

Straight on, until she reached the side of the horse upon which the detective was seated, rushed the woman, when she caught at the saddle-horn for support, gasping for breath, and presenting a perfect picture of despair.

Allgazed at her open-mouthed, but with the deepest sympathy.

"What is it, Mrs. Nichols?" asked Lyons; "what on earth has happened?"

"Our child!" cried out the agonized woman. "Nita's little babe! It has been killed—its little throat cut by Rodney Reed, the demon, the child's own father!"

A yell of horror burst from every throat.

"Stand aside, Mrs. Nichols! Don't hinder us. We are starting out now, to hunt the murderer down, and hang him. He has carried off Miss Nora Norrington!"

"You should thank God the child is dead, if that fiend's blood ran in its veins."

"On, men! Spare not your spurs! Death to Red Reed!"

"Death to Red Reed!" echoed the mad-dened Texans.

Past Mrs. Nichols, dashed at headlong speed the mounted pursuers, Lyons in the lead; the mad mob following, filling the air with vengeful yells, and leaving the half-crazed woman alone on the moonlit Plaza. One glance she gave at the on-speeding throng. Then, with a loud cry, she threw up her arms in the air, and fell senseless in the dust of the Plaza.

But her still form was soon discovered, and sympathetic friends carried her to her home—a home made doubly desolate, for Mrs. Nichols had recovered, to find her daughter lying unconscious beside her;

and, when she had succeeded in restoring Nita, the girl had sprung to the corpse of her child, wrapped it in a shawl, and ran madly from the *casa*.

She took no notice whatever of her mother, who stood horror-stricken for a moment, and then rushed out in search of her; but not a trace was to be seen.

Mrs. Nichols had not been given time sufficient to inform the detective that Nita was wandering, she knew not where, with the dead body of her babe in her arms, and she evidently devoid of reason.

Headlong rode the pursuing squad of Texans, with Barnes and Lyons in the lead; neither of them speaking a word, and every one filled with horror at the thought of all that had happened.

When they arrived at a point within view of the Norrington Mansion, they were again astounded, by observing that which appeared to be a young man, as far as costume went, but whose long hair flew wildly in the breeze. This person was mounted, and held something wrapped in a shawl of brilliant colors.

A second glance showed this night rider to be a female.

Straight out from the stables of the old banker darted this stranger upon one of the fleetest horses that had been within; and some of the negroes were seen emerging from clumps of shrubbery in the garden, as if they had been hiding in a fresh terror, and were now relieved at the appearance of Lyons and his men.

"In the fiend's name, who's that?" demanded Barnes, as he gazed into the face of his companion. "What is going to happen next? Is the whole world gone mad?"

"I believe you've struck pretty near the right string this time," returned Lyons. "As to who that rider with the long hair is, I have no idea; but we shall soon know, for here come the negroes. They seem nearly frightened to death, and it is not much wonder."

Two darkies now came up hurriedly.

"What's the matter now, Pomp?" asked Lyons. "Who is that who has just gone off on one of your master's horses? Speak, man! Don't be frightened until you're hurt."

"Thank de Lor', Mars' Lyons, ye've done come back! We-uns'll all go plum crazy, if de awful doin's don't stop soon. Dat's a young lady, what's dressed up in britches an' sich. She war here ter speak wid Nora a while back, but she's gone lunny now fer sure."

"She's got a baby wid its froat cut, totin' hit wid her. I 'clar' fo' gracious, dar's p'ison doin's goin' on all de time."

"Spur ahead, men! That's Nita Nichols, with her murdered child in her arms. The poor girl has gone mad, I reckon. She's on the trail for revenge, and she's got enough of Mexican blood in her veins to cause her to be a terror, after all she has gone through."

"I tell you, this is the most horrible business I ever came up with. We'll follow that dastard to the Bravo, if necessary!"

"Death to Red Reed!" again yelled the Texans.

"Scatter, boys, and look for 'sign'! He wasn't alone when the Mexicans and Lije were murdered, and I believe he has a gang of outlaws with him."

"Look sharp, and be lively! A moment's time may decide the fate of Miss Norrington; and the life of poor Nita Nichols depends upon us also."

Every second man, at this, sprang from his horse, the others holding the animals of those who had dismounted; and a thorough search of the ground about the mansion was begun.

A very short time elapsed, however, when a signal yell announced the discovery of the trail, which had been difficult to find, on account of the mesquites shading the ground.

The Texan who first observed "sign" did not make known the fact, until he had followed the trail quite a distance—thus satisfying himself that he had not been mistaken.

At his signal, the mounted men, headed by Lyons, rode to the spot.

"Red Reed's trail is found, boys!" cried the successful one; "he has a dozen men with him—all Greasers, I reckon, for there's not a shod horse in the party. The trail points to the Rio Medina."

"Mount, and away!" yelled Lyons.

"Hurrah for Rogers, the boss trailer! Death to Red Reed!"

The cheers were given, and the last yell of their leader repeated in chorus.

Then all sped, as fast as Rogers, who kept in the front, bent over in his saddle, viewing the ground.

Thus on, went the avengers, toward the Rio Medina, speeding like the wind; while, fully a mile in their front, and galloping in the same direction, at terrific speed—her butchered babe clasped closely to her breast—was Nita Nichols, the much-wronged, the fearfully bereaved!

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE COYOTES IN CAMP.

RED REED was confident that he could evade any pursuing party, from the fact that nearly all who were with him were horse-thieves who had been followed many a time but never overtaken.

Every foot of the country between San Antonio and the Rio Grande was known to Pedro Pinales and most of his confederates in crime, and they felt equally secure.

Had not Reed been thus confident he would not have dared attempt his later murders, but would have contented himself with abducting Nora Norrington, and trusting to luck to replace the fortune he had stolen from the old banker, and which had in turn been stolen from him.

From being positive that he could reach the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, he had given full scope to his vengeful passions, carrying out every one of his fiendish plans with surprising success.

He had had good reason for thinking, on the previous night, that the fates had been against him, but one of his plans having been successful, namely the capture of his rival.

The loss of the fortune, which he so long schemed and plotted to gain through the girl he had ruined, worried him to a state of desperation and filled him with a thirst for revenge, but during his second night of crime he had good reason to decide that fortune favored him.

He believed that the gold, which had been gained by the murder of the cattle-buyers, was quite a sum; far from being equal, of course, to the amount of which he had robbed the safe, but sufficient for present uses. And then, too, more could be gained in the same manner.

He had with him a band of daring and desperate Greasers, who, being themselves outlaws, were to be depended upon.

He had both Clarence Coleman and Nora Norrington in his power, and he had avenged himself upon Nita Nichols for having deprived him of the proceeds of the safe robbery.

As far as had been possible, he had gained his points, won the game, and swept the board.

Thus far he had kept his oath.

In consequence of all this, not only Reed but the whole band of "Crimson Coyotes" were jubilant; for gold in plenty they had, Pedro having reported to them that the second visit of himself and the capitan had proved more successful than the first.

However, Pedro impressed upon their minds the necessity of caution and silence, asserting that a pursuing party might start on their trail very soon on account of Capitan Reed having fired the Norrington dwelling, the blaze from which would alarm the city.

All were rejoiced, as much from the fact that they were speeding away from San Antonio as they were from having gotten possession of the gold, for not one among the Crimson Coyotes was there who had not been obliged to keep in hiding during the daytime while within the precincts of the Alamo City.

Pedro realized the necessity of headlong speed during the first night's flight. He therefore took the lead, with Red Reed at his side, and the others galloped in pairs after them, until the Rio Medina was reached.

The spot where Augustine and the half-dozen Greasers collected by him were located with their captive, Clarence Coleman, was of course known to Pedro Pinales. Instantly he detached two of the main party, ordering them to proceed at once to Augus-

tine and report the successes of the night—but not in the hearing of the captive.

They were then to bind the latter upon a horse and hasten to the San Miguel, to a certain point, at which the two parties would join forces about daylight.

These two messengers at once proceeded on their mission, and Pedro led on through the timber, fording the Medina, and then speeding south, toward the San Miguel.

But poor Nora Norrington had regained her senses long previous to reaching the Rio Medina; the gallop through the cool and bracing night air having caused her to return to consciousness, but, luckily for her, so slowly that she kept up the same appearance, making no outcry, or by any sudden start betraying the fact that she was aware of her position.

As a matter of course, it required a powerful exertion of will for the maiden to refrain from manifesting her terror and aversion at finding herself in the arms of her father's murderer. But, a few words dropped by Pedro nerved her to the exertion of her will and self-control to that extent.

Not aware that the fair captive had approached recovery sufficient to hear or know that he spoke, Pedro had said:

"Shall we kill Senor Coleman, capitan, or take him along to the San Miguel?"

"We'll take him with us, you can just bet!" answered Reed, exultantly. "Why, the best part of the whole business to me will be to torture the soft-headed fool nearly to insanity, through this bundle of dry goods I have in my arms."

"I shall have the satisfaction of enjoying the sweetest kind of revenge upon both, by forcing each to witness the anguish of the other. I'll give Coleman good cause to curse the day he was born, before I'm through with him."

"He shall see his precious darling Nora in the embrace of Rodney Reed, while he lies bound like a dog, and helpless. By all the fiends, I'll rack the hearts of both, as human hearts were never racked before!"

"Ha! ha! I'll prove to them that I can keep my oath—that I'm bound to win every time. Hurrah for Mexico, Pedro!"

"I said we'd roll in gold, and you've begun to find out that I intend to keep my word. But just now, I'm going in for revenge. It's sweeter far than gold to Red Reed."

"They'll begin to realize, in San Antonio, before daylight that they gave me a most appropriate *sobriquet*. But, I say, it's strange that we see no signs of a conflagration in that direction. I believed we would have the satisfaction of getting a view of the flames, as old Norrington's house blazed skyward."

"So we should, capitan, had not some one extinguished them; and that proves, that the absence of the senorita has been discovered. Lyons, and a lot more Texans, will be on our trail. Perhaps they are already."

"Spur deep, and we'll keep a long distance between us and the pursuers. I know many hiding-places on the San Miguel, and we can easily outwit them."

The reader will, without doubt, admit that poor Nora had far too much misery and anguish upon her mind, previous to overhearing these words; and, indeed, she was in an almost distracted state. But, when she learned, from the conversation of her merciless captors, that Clarence had been taken by men who belonged to this same party of villainous outlaws, her case seemed indeed hopeless.

She would have considered death a blessing; for she had, since her gradual recovery, decided that the band of Mexicans, that had been bribed by Rodney Reed, were now hastening toward the Rio Medina, where she had believed her lover to be in hiding, and that once there, he might providentially discover her terrible position, ride for help, and thus she might be rescued.

It was fearful now, to hear, that Clarence, like herself, was in the power of Rodney Reed; whose threatening words, in connection with her lover and herself, caused her blood to run chill.

And, when Reed had spoken of his disappointment, in not beholding the blaze from the conflagration of her home, she could hardly suppress a cry of alarm and horror.

To think that her father's corpse was burning within the parlor of their once happy home, was terrible—most terrible! And the

words of Pedro, who asserted his belief, that the fire had been extinguished, and a party of pursuers might already be on their track, gave a gleam of hope; although there were little grounds for rejoicing.

After some pondering, however, Nora was forced to consider it fortunate, after all, that Clarence had been captured by the same band as herself; for, while there was life, there was hope, and there was a possibility that Mr. Lyons would organize a party to pursue the yellow-skinned pirates, and save both herself and her lover.

Still on, through the night, the maiden's captors rode, speeding over plain and through mesquite belts. Poor Nora's frame was racked with pain, from being thus held in a cramped position; and, had it not been for the thought that she might soon behold Clarence Coleman, she must have gone mad.

But should these wretches kill Clarence?

Were father and lover both gone, life, she felt, would be insupportable.

With such thoughts floating through a mental haze, which providentially prevented too acute suffering of mind, she was borne along; the brute who held her becoming at last alarmed at her seeming insensibility. He therefore halted, dashing water into her face; but except by moaning she manifested no signs of returning to consciousness.

The miscreant was satisfied, however, when he found that she still lived.

On sped the "Crimson Coyotes," darting into the dark shades of the bottom-timber.

Thus far they had taken little trouble to deceive trailers who might follow, but no sooner did Pedro enter the timber than he led the Coyotes, who were ordered to ride singly, along a maze of cattle-paths. Eventually, they forded the stream; and then Pedro, practicing every Indian device he could bring to mind, did his utmost to confuse and mislead those who were expected to follow them.

Before a halt was made the outlaw band was fully two miles down stream from the point at which they had entered the timber, and on the opposite side of the river.

An "open" of sufficient size to accommodate all, both men and horses, and where many a time Pedro and his gang of "rustlers" had lain secreted, was chosen for the hiding-place for the day; Pedro intending to keep a spy on the lookout for any who might be in pursuit of them—stationing his spy in a tree on the outer border of the northern timber line.

But two narrow paths gave entrance and exit from the "open" chosen by Pedro; dense walls of thorny thickets forming the undergrowth, beneath the towering trees that surrounded the outlaw encampment.

Nora Norrington was immediately placed upon blankets, and others thrown over her, on the border of the "open" beneath the overhanging branches. Not one among them paid her the slightest attention, except to secure her wrists together behind her back—she still feigning unconsciousness.

In fact, all were too much fatigued and too hungry to think of anything except to cater to their own wants and then rest; although they did not forget, first to care for their horses, upon which their safety—ay, their lives, depended.

CHAPTER XXX.

METHOD IN HER MADNESS.

THE breakfast was prepared, and eaten with keen appetites by the "Crimson Coyotes," food and coffee being placed by the side of Nora Norrington, by Reed's order.

To insure against the maiden's being able, upon returning to consciousness, to decide in whose power she was, her vile captor caused bushes to be cut, and a bower built around and over her. This having been attended to, the horses were changed to fresh grass, and a guard dispatched, to keep watch of the north plain.

Then the outlaws lay down to sleep.

Red Reed ordered one of his men to seek the point near at hand, beyond the river, at which the party who held Clarence Coleman captive had been directed to halt; and to inform them that they were to remain there until further orders.

After all had sought sleeping-places, or set out upon their missions, Reed and Pedro

examined the saddle-bags which had belonged to the Mexicans they had murdered; and their joy was great, at finding themselves possessed of a vast sum in gold, for they had been suspicious that the coin might be Mexican dollars.

Everything had worked favorably for them, and they were highly exultant.

They felt no concern, in regard to those who might pursue them; for they had taken every precaution to defeat trailers, and besides the Texans, who might follow them, would not dream of such a thing as their camping near the San Miguel.

After committing such crimes as they had, the Texans would naturally conclude that the band of Red Reed would ride as long as their horses would stand, then steal other animals, and keep on toward the Rio Grande. Consequently, Reed and Pedro felt perfectly safe, and more than satisfied with their own success. Taking, therefore, each one-half of the gold, they crawled into coverts near each other to sleep; intending, the latter portion of the coming night, to gallop toward the Rio Frio.

In ten minutes more, all was still in the camp of the Crimson Coyotes; even the horses ceasing to crop the grass, and standing upon three legs, with drooping heads, also slept.

Nora Norrington lay, still and silent as death.

She felt positive that Clarence Coleman was not far distant. Feeling that she stood greatly in need of both food and drink, she waited until she was no longer noticed by the guard, and partook of that which had been placed beside her; for she realized that her life might depend upon her strength—that, at any time, when least expected, there might be an opening for escape, of which she could not take advantage if enervated through hunger and fatigue.

After poor Nora had eaten, she striving with all her power of will to keep up her hope and courage, the thought of the possible—indeed, probable—presence of Clarence in her near vicinity, added to her hopefulness, although there were little grounds for it to rest upon.

As she had been deprived of sleep for forty-eight hours, her weary eyelids soon closed; and she was, until long past the noontide hour, mercifully unconscious of her condition, and the dread dangers that surrounded her.

Had Pedro Pinales but looked to the westward, at the time he led the way at the head of the Crimson Coyotes into the timber of the San Miguel, he might possibly have beheld, afar off, a solitary equestrian, speeding along the border of a belt of trees, which marked the course of a small creek, which was a tributary of the San Miguel.

But, expecting no pursuers, except from a point directly behind him, and these not for some hours to come, Pedro was not very particular about scanning the view, except toward the north. So the pursuer rode on unobserved.

The lone rider was poor Nita Nichols; and she held, tightly clutched to her breast, the body of her murdered infant.

Nita's face was ghastly, her black eyes were blazing with an unnatural light which spoke of a thirst for revenge that bordered on insanity, and her features were contorted with an agony of soul that was painful to look upon. Her long black hair flew wild and free, and she was attired in the same masculine attire which she had worn to the San Pedro, when she went in search of the Norrington gold and papers, and at the time that she discovered the senseless mother and the corpse of her babe.

The horse she rode was a superb animal, but it was now bespattered with foam.

Following the creek to its junction with the San Miguel, the poor bereaved young woman, repudiating fatigue, proceeded down-stream.

But Nita practiced great cunning.

She believed that the outlaw band intended to cross the river; so she forded, and passed through the timber belt. Slowly she made her way down the river, keeping within the shadow of the timber, where the grassy sward drowned all sounds of her horse's hoofs.

At least a mile had she thus traveled, when she caught the scent of cooking meat, and the aroma of coffee, on the morning air.

Instantly she turned her horse into the undergrowth, slid from the saddle, and laid her ghastly burden upon the carpet of leaves. After removing the equipments, and lariatting the horse, she took up the dead child, and stole cautiously through the thickets, toward the river.

In Nita's belt were a navy-size Colt's "six," and a long Spanish dagger.

With the stealthy movements of an Apache brave on the war-path, Nita stole forward until she gained a point on the border of the timber, which commanded a view of the "open" in which was the camp of the Crimson Coyotes.

By this time the outlaws had satisfied their hunger, and were thinking of rest and sleep.

Unfortunately for Nora Norrington, the shelter of branches had been built about her before the arrival of Nita Nichols, or the latter would doubtless have discovered her, and braved danger and death to release her.

She saw, however, when Reed and Pedro drew away from the camp-fire, and she crept forward to a point from which she could see the two miscreants as they counted the doubloons.

From the conversation which she then overheard, she learned of the cowardly murder of the four men in San Antonio, and she knew that a posse would soon be on the trail of the assassins.

She heard them congratulate themselves upon all their plans having been consummated, since their bad luck in losing the proceeds of the safe robbery. Since then, they felt that the fates had favored them, and they were exultant and jubilant.

She could hear them boast of having Clarence and Nora in their power, and she wondered where these two captives could be.

But she determined to find them.

She would be a very Nemesis on the trail of the demons.

They should once again have good cause to curse themselves hoarse, and decide a second time that the infernal fates had deserted them. The much-wronged woman vowed, with one hand upon the head of her murdered babe, and the other raised toward Heaven, that she would baffle every plan of the dastard, Red Reed, and right the terrible wrongs that he had done, as far as it was possible for human hand to accomplish it.

The time was fast drawing near when Nita would have an opportunity to begin her programme of vengeance and retribution.

She had upon reflection decided that Red Reed should, in place of dying by her hand, suffer an ignominious death at the hands of the San Antonio mob—the same mob that he had urged on to hang the innocent victim of his hellish plot, Clarence Coleman.

She knew that, having been for so long deprived of sleep, as well as from the quantity of spirits they had drank, both Reed and his yellow pard would slumber soundly, and the time dragged slowly to the impatient avenger, as she waited for them to count the gold which she vowed their eyes should never again look upon.

But eventually her watch was at an end, and she could hear the hard breathing of both villains in adjacent thickets.

Luckily for Nita, the pair had chosen coverts at some distance from any of their comrades, in order that they might count the gold, unseen by them.

When Nita was satisfied that she could move with safety, she crept forward—the corpse of her babe still pressed to her breast—and soon she saw the swarthy and repulsive face of the author of all her misery.

It required all the girl's strength of will to control herself, and keep from springing upon the sleeping miscreant and burying her knife in his vile heart!

She had to pause, that she might keep down the volcano of rage that seethed in her brain and bosom. Soon, however, she moved forward, holding the dagger ready in case the miscreant should awaken, while she gently removed the saddle-bags, about which his arms were wound.

This done, she took the body of her infant and placed it in the embrace of the father who had taken its life. This was a terrible sacrifice for Nita to make, but revenge drowned all other feelings and emotions.

She then left the sleeping father with the babe that he had murdered in his arms.

Next she succeeded in removing the saddle-bags of gold from Pedro, who, had he awakened, would have been pierced to the heart by her dagger.

Having accomplished this most important commencement of her plan of revenge, Nita stole to the river and cast the blanket that had been about her dead child into the stream, the same floating away on the surface of the waters.

Then she dropped both of the heavily-laden saddle-bags into the river close by the bank, making mental note of the surroundings.

That done, with much relief she crawled away to continue her work of vengeance.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A WOMAN'S WORK.

AFTER sinking the gold in the river, Nita Nichols could scarce restrain herself from shrieking out in her triumph. Governed by an irresistible influence, she stole back to gaze upon the sleeping dastard with the corpse of his butchered child in his embrace.

Then an idea was presented to her mind, which she at once put in force. Making her way stealthily to the side of Red Reed, she secured a strong buckskin thong around the corpse of the infant, the two ends of which she bound fast, one to each of Reed's arms near the shoulder. She then stole away into the shades.

The sun had by this time arisen, and this obliged Nita to be more cautious still in her movements. Her whole mind was now bent on the discovery and rescue of Nora Norrington. She would have risked her life over and over again to save Nora from the power of her vile captor.

Long she searched, skirting the "open" and coming to a spot near that from which she had started before she gained the slightest clew. Then she halted where she saw that a number of large bushes had been cut down. Here she scanned her surroundings, at last perceiving that these bushes had been dragged into the "open."

Upon reaching the border of the undergrowth, to her joy and relief, upon peeping through the screen of leaves she discovered the arbor that had been erected for the safety—more than the benefit—of Nora Norrington.

But between herself and this, Nita beheld the outstretched form of a brutal-faced Mexican, who appeared to be fighting against sleep.

That this outlaw was guarding the arbor, and that Nora was within it, Nita felt positive.

She knew that it would be a desperate and dangerous undertaking to rescue Nora, indeed it would be impossible, unless the Greaser guard should fall into a deep slumber, or she should plunge her knife into his heart.

Did she attempt the latter, he might yell and thus alarm the camp. But she felt no more aversion in the matter of killing him, than she would in slaying a venomous reptile.

The Mexican turned over and over in a restless manner, to prevent himself from falling asleep, until Nita, who was tortured with anxiety and impatience, knowing that at any time Red Reed might awaken, felt that something must be done without delay.

Should Reed alarm the camp, there would be an end of her attempt at rescuing Nora Norrington.

Nita pondered upon this possibility as she gazed at the restless Greaser. She became almost frantic with nervous impatience. Still, the outlaw remained awake.

One movement he made which sealed his doom.

He pulled the brim of his sombrero far over his forehead to shade his eyes.

This, with one other favorable discovery, decided Nora to wait no longer.

A blanket lay upon the ground near him.

His sombrero would prevent her approach from being noticed. The blanket she could hold over his mouth to prevent him from yelling and alarming the camp.

At once she stole, knife in hand, cut from

the undergrowth. Crawling toward the Mexican's head she secured the blanket, wadding it up in a bunch.

Then, like an enraged panther she sprung forward, thrusting the blanket into the Greaser's face, and throwing her whole weight upon it, at the same time burying her knife to the hilt in his breast!

For some time it was a desperate struggle.

Kicking and thrashing his arms wildly, the death-stricken wretch writhed beneath her while the life-blood welled from his breast!

A few spasmodic quivers and then the outlaw lay dead!

Springing erect, Nita stood for a moment panting with exertion. Then she crept forward and gave a hiss of caution through the wall of bushes. After this, she spoke in a low tone the captive's name:

"Nora!"

It was answered in a hushed and hopeful voice.

Had not Nora Norrington, after speaking, recalled the fact that her name must have been spoken by Nita Nichols, the appearance of the latter—in male attire, her long hair flowing wildly, and a bloody knife in her hand—must have terrified her, and caused her to scream out; thus jeopardizing the life of her would-be rescuer.

Instantly the cords that bound Nora were severed, and she arose, and staggered into the outstretched arms of her deliverer.

"Come quickly," said Nita, in a husky and broken voice; "danger and death surround us." And she forced Nora from the arbor.

"Look!" she added: "a longing for vengeance has transformed me, a poor weak girl, into a merciless layer of men! I had to kill the guard, to save you, Miss Norrington!"

Nora shuddered, and clung to Nita again, as they darted into the shades beyond.

"You are the bravest girl in the world," she said: "you are a heroine! You have saved me from a most terrible fate."

"You are not saved yet, Miss Nora. We must be sly and cautious, or that demon will find us. Then—but we must not think of it."

"You know not all of the crimes of Rodney Reed. He and his band murdered four men, last night, in San Antonio; then—oh, God!—he slew my little baby, his own child!"

"Can you believe it? I hardly realize it myself, yet it is true. He drew his knife across its little throat; and, when I returned, and saw what he had done, I fell down beside it, and lay—I don't know how long."

"Then I took my baby's corpse, and hastened to you. I almost flew through the mesquites. But, when I reached your home, I found that the demon had been there again, and torn you away from your dead father."

"But my heart seemed to fly to you, and that saved me from seeking death in the river, with my dead child in my arms. I could not think of dying, while I knew you were in that dastard's power; so I took one of your fleetest horses, and galloped after the 'Crimson Coyotes,' as they call themselves, and their captain, Red Reed."

"Look, Miss Nora! I will show you a sight, such as you never saw before—such as, I believe, no mortal ever saw before."

They had been stealing through the undergrowth, while Nita was thus speaking; Nora clinging to her arm, and regarding her, in her gratitude, as a superior being. From the fact that Nita, a slender and delicate girl, had, single-handed, slain a burly bandit, Nora Norrington looked upon her rescuer with no little awe.

As Nita parted the bushes of a thicket, into which the two had stolen, Nora followed the direction indicated by her companion, and shrunk back in horror, at the dreadful and repulsive scene that was presented to her view. This was Red Reed, slumbering, with the babe, all bloodstained—slain by his own hand—clasped, in seeming affection, to his vile breast; as he had previously held the gold of the murdered Mexican!

The form of the wretch writhed, as Nora and Nita stood spell-bound with a horrible fascination which they could not fight against, although they both well knew that they stood upon the brink of what was worse than any death. It seemed to them that the assassin was about to awake, and that in a minute's time, the thickets would be swarm-

ing, with his fiendish horde, in search of them!

But it was ordained, in mercy, that this was not to be.

Red Reed became more composed; the visions of horror which had disturbed his slumbers having evidently vanished.

Then the two females drew toward the river, Nita saying:

"Make haste! We must not remain anywhere near. We must seek some secure place at once!"

"Oh, Heavens, what a terrible sight that was! Nita, you have nerves of steel, or you could never have gone through what you have this day. I would rather die than go near that demon, as you did, and it is strange that you should leave that poor baby—even though it be dead—with its merciless murderer!"

"Oh, I believe there never was a more awful crime! But, Nita—tell me; do you know anything in regard to Clarence Coleman? I heard those wretches talking about him, saying that he was in their power, and that we should both be tortured—each through witnessing the agony of the other. I expected that I would have met him here, a captive, bound and suffering like myself."

"Oh, Nita! Can we not find him? I am weak, but I hope soon to feel stronger, and I will brave anything to save Clarence. If they have killed him, I care not to live."

Nita paused and wound her arms around Nora's neck.

A strange scene it was.

They appeared, Nita being in her buckskin masquerading suit, like lovers, were it not for the long masses of ebony tresses that fell below her waist.

"Miss Nora," she said, in a tone of the deepest sympathy, "we go to trace Clarence Coleman. If he lives, as I feel assured he does, we will save him."

"I expect Mr. Lyons and his men are now not far off, on the trail of the Crimson Coyotes. Vengeance, you will see, is soon to overwhelm Rodney Reed, and all who associate with him."

"A curse is on the head of your father's murderer, and the slayer of his own innocent child. Come."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE PURSUERS AND THE PURSUED.

LYONS and his posse succeeded in gaining a view of the Crimson Coyotes, when the latter were far away upon the southern plain; the former being just on the border of a belt of mesquites, through which the outlaws had passed, not more than half an hour previous.

Bearing to the west, and keeping themselves within the mesquites, the pursuers eventually reached the western side of the same creek, down which, on the opposite side, Nita Nichols had galloped.

Lyons and his men had, on several occasions, caught sight of Nita; and were greatly concerned in regard to the unfortunate girl. They believed that she had become deranged, and that she must inevitably fall into the hands of Red Reed; who, without doubt, would murder her.

They concluded that the assassin had, in some manner, learned that Nita had played the spy on him. Had not this been the case, he would not have avenged himself on the mother, by slaying the child, in her absence.

Had Nita been at home, Reed would certainly have killed her.

Had there been any chance of overtaking the poor girl, the Texans would have ridden their horses nearly to death, to save her from the vengeance of Red Reed. But this, they knew, was impossible; and even, were they to attempt it, they would be liable to be discovered by the outlaws, whom they wished to feel secure, in order that they might not pass beyond the San Miguel.

That Red Reed would apprehend pursuit, and hasten on toward the Rio Frio, was the one thing that worried Lyons.

In such an event, the pursuers feared their horses would give out, as they had pressed the animals at terrific speed to gain the distance, or at least a portion of it, that the outlaws had made, before they discovered their trail. This, however, they found to be impossible.

The main object of Lyons was to gain the south side of the San Miguel, in the vicinity

of the point to which the outlaws were headed, and make sure that Red Reed did not keep on toward the Frio. Therefore it was, that he had led his men to the west side of the timber line of the creek mentioned; ere long reaching its junction with the river.

Quickly fording, they passed through the timber, all gazing intently over the south plain.

It was just daylight, and, much to their relief, there was nothing upon the plain to break the view.

They knew that the outlaws must be encamped amid the timber of the San Miguel, and certainly within three or four miles of their position; for, there had not been sufficient time for them to gallop from view, in the direction of the Rio Frio.

In this way it was, that Lyons, by thus having proceeded, escaped being seen by the sentinel of the "Coyotes," who had watched from a tree-top at the north border of the timber.

No sooner was it decided that Red Reed had halted than Lyons and his men knew that their presence had not been suspected, and that, therefore, they held a considerable advantage.

To halt, rest, and allow their animals to graze, as well as to break their own fast, was a necessity; and a favorable place being found in a bend of the river, the horses were at once stripped of their equipments and staked. Fires were kindled with wood that was the least likely to betray their presence by its smoke, and food and coffee were prepared. These were partaken of with appetites born of a long ride in the night air over the prairies.

Little delay was made after this.

A guard of two men was left with the horses, the main force being divided, half on each side of the river in a long line, all proceeding with great caution down the San Miguel. Lyons was satisfied that he was in a fair way to discover and capture Red Reed and rescue Clarence Coleman and Nora Norrington. Besides, he hoped to save poor Nita Nichols from the vengeance of the demon who had blighted her life and murdered her child.

The detective had given instructions to each and all of the volunteers under his command to avoid, if possible, killing Reed and Pedro, as it would forward the ends of justice and serve as a warning to others of their class to hang them in the city where their crimes had been perpetrated.

When the two messengers from Red Reed arrived at the secret hiding-place of those who had preceded them to the Rio Medina, and who, under the command of Augustine, held Clarence Coleman captive, they communicated all that had occurred—the distribution of the gold by their captain, and the collecting of a dozen more men by Pedro, thus forming a strong band when they should unite.

All this caused Augustine and his pals great joy, while the recent desperate acts of Reed, as recounted by his messengers, gave them great confidence in their leader and high hopes for the future.

Yet they reasoned that they were far from being "out of the woods," that it was probable a strong party of Texans would pursue them, who would be as liable to strike their trail as that of the stronger party under Captain Reed.

With this thought, they saddled their mustangs in haste, their conference having been held beyond the hearing of their captive.

The latter was roughly put astride the same animal that he had ridden when he made his escape from the mob, and secured fast. They then hastened from the Medina, on their way to the San Miguel.

There could scarce have been a more wretched man on earth than was Clarence Coleman, during that night gallop.

From the demeanor of the Mexicans, he believed that, not only had Rodney Reed escaped capture, but that he had committed other dark crimes, and had now gathered around him a band of Greaser outlaws.

He recalled the words of Nora Norrington, to the effect that she felt assured Rodney Reed would abduct her, did he get the opportunity.

He knew that Reed was capable of it.

A terrible load of anguish had Clarence to bear; for he knew not that his innocence had been clearly established, and that the robbery also had been brought home to Rodney Reed.

All this, with the apprehension he felt in regard to Nora, was enough to drive an ordinary mind off its balance. But Clarence bore up bravely, notwithstanding loss of sleep, and privation from food and drink; for, not only had his brutal captors eaten and drank before him, but they had tantalized him every way, not giving him a drop of water to assuage his terrible thirst.

It was a great relief, when at last the Greasers entered the dark, cool shades of the San Miguel, and removed the lariats that bound him to the horse, thus suffering him to fall to the ground, while they laughed and sneered at his helplessness.

The young man vowed mentally that, should he be so fortunate as to escape, he would repay all these indignities with interest.

But escape seemed impossible; and, when a strange Mexican joined the party, soon after their arrival at the San Miguel, and held a conference with his captors, whose joy and exultation seemed to be doubled at the intelligence thus brought them—then Clarence felt that he was certainly doomed to death, that Rodney Reed was near at hand, and had sent this messenger with directions as to himself.

Not long after, one of the Greasers gave him a cup of water, and he was also fed with dried beef and *tortillas*; the Mexicans having begun to fear that his strength would give out, or they would not thus have gratified his hunger and thirst.

He was then dragged up to a tree-trunk, and bound to it in a sitting posture, a lariat being passed around his body, beneath his arms, and then around the tree, where it was made fast.

When this had been done, Clarence was not a little surprised to see all of his captors crawl into the surrounding thicket, with the evident intention of sleeping.

This seemed to indicate that they apprehended no danger—that neither they nor the other party had been pursued, or else, that sentinels had been posted at points where any, who might follow as enemies, would be discovered, and reported, in ample time to evade them, or prepare for defense.

This plunged the unhappy young man into still deeper despair; for it indicated that none of his San Antonio friends had sufficient interest in him to seek him out.

Surely, if Reed's guilt had been discovered, the latter would have been followed, without delay, by Barnes and Lyons with a full force of volunteers, for they were both intimate friends of his, and he had proclaimed Rodney Reed to be the guilty party—guilty of the murder of Norman Norrington—and had warned Barnes also, in his note, in regard to the safe.

With such thoughts as these in the mind of Clarence Coleman, he was long kept from somnolence; but, eventually, nature asserted itself, and his head drooped upon his breast, in fitful slumber.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GONE FROM HIS GAZE.

NITA NICHOLS, when she had been peering into the camp of the "Crimson Coyotes," had not allowed any incident to pass unnoticed. So, when she led Nora away, she proceeded in the direction taken by the last man, who had been dispatched from the camp by Red Reed; and cautioned her to strict silence, in both movement and speech, as the other party of Mexicans must be quite near at hand.

It was, they found, but a short distance to the river; which, at this point, was narrow. To their relief, they discovered that a huge tree had fallen across, forming a bridge; and, as Nita assisted Nora across, she pointed out to her, that a twig upon one of the branches had recently been broken. It was evident, therefore, that they were on the right route.

Nita had not the slightest idea that there would be any opportunity for them to effect a rescue of Clarence Coleman, even should they discover him; for there would, without doubt, be several Mexicans guarding him. But, she wished to satisfy herself, and also Nora, that Clarence was on the San Miguel,

and in the power of Red Reed's band; and, should Lyons appear, with a *posse* of citizens, she would be able to conduct him to the place where the young man was held captive.

Yet, at the same time, Nita felt that it was a very hazardous undertaking.

Since she had accomplished a portion of her revenge and had taken Nora Norrington under her protection, the poor girl had become less wild in her appearance and actions.

After crossing the log-bridge, they proceeded very stealthily for a short distance; when Nita prevailed upon her fair companion to crawl into a dense thicket and there remain until she returned, promising not to be long absent.

Very reluctantly Nora consented; and Nita, stealing up the stream, left the maiden thus in the lonely forest surrounded by dangers.

Not far had she gone when she distinctly heard a groan, and distinguished the heavy breathing of, as she believed, a human being. Had she been less excited she would have detected the last-mentioned sounds much sooner than she did; but now, upon reflection, she decided they were made by the horses of the outlaws, and she must be near their camp.

But the Greasers led their animals some distance east, and down the stream from the place at which they had halted.

Nora lay upon the leafy carpet, trembling with terror; when at last her keen ear detected the groaning which Nita had also heard. Something in the sound gave her an irresistible desire to ascertain from whom it could come; for, as was natural under the circumstances, she had a suspicion that she had accidentally been left by Nita near the camp of the outlaws who held Clarence captive—in fact, the very spot for which they were searching.

Upon crawling nearer, however, she perceived, to her horror, a brutal-looking Mexican lying upon his back and in a deep slumber.

Nora drew back in terror.

This time she caught the direction whence the groan proceeded and she crawled toward that portion of the thicket, soon reaching the outer border of the bushes. The sight there met her gaze, providentially rendered her incapable of motion or speech; otherwise she would have betrayed herself by shrieking, or rushing out from her covert.

Straight before her she beheld Clarence Coleman!

He was bound to a tree in the manner that has been described, and had been now and then, falling into snatches of slumber.

When he was asleep the past would be banished; but each awakening was a terrible shock, causing him to groan.

Nora stared steadily at him, unable to remove her gaze for an instant. Only her face could be seen on the outside of the thicket, from the position which she occupied.

But the eyes of Clarence turned slowly upward from the ground and became fixed, in the utmost amazement upon the pale but angelic face, which he knew and loved so well.

Clarence Coleman was horror-stricken, for he thought only of Nora Norrington, as far north of him in San Antonio.

Thus man and maid gazed at each other, in the utmost amazement; but, as they did so, a series of the most horrible shrieks shot through the timber.

Those outcries seemed to be the signal for dangerous and startling demonstrations; for, close following, rung the sharp crack of rifles, and a perfect pandemonium ruled the bottom-timber of the San Miguel.

The slumbering outlaws in the thickets sprung up, half-paralyzed with terror.

Only a moment gazed they at each other, for the rattling fusillade of revolver-shots that followed the crack of rifles, told them plainly that the Texan avengers were annihilating the stronger portion of their band.

At once they sped in frantic fright toward their mustangs, through the undergrowth.

So near to her had one of the outlaws been sleeping, that poor Nora, as he sprung upward, sunk helpless to the earth, expecting the knife of the Mexican to be sheathed in her breast. But, recalling the fact that she

had seen her lover, bound and suffering, she staggered to her feet, falling again twice and being obliged to cling to the bushes for support. The sounds of combat bewildered her, and she struggled from the thicket, as she believed, in the direction she had beheld Clarence—but it was just the opposite.

The captive struggled like a madman to free himself from his bonds.

While thus struggling, he looked again toward the face he had seen among the foliage.

It was no longer there!

For himself, however, rescue was at hand. Providentially Nita Nichols now strayed toward the point where he was secured.

"Where is Nora?" she exclaimed. "Oh, Senor Coleman, Senorita Norrington is here, in the woods! I left her here, after rescuing her from Rodney Reed."

"Great Heavens! It was her, then, that I saw!"

Clarence was released in an instant, and Nita dashed off through the thicket. She soon reached the spot at which she had left Nora, but Nora was gone. Half distracted, she rushed back to Clarence Coleman, crying out:

"She is lost! Nora is lost!"

That was all she could articulate.

Clarence staggered forward, toward the river.

Again Nita Nichols darted wildly through the undergrowth beyond the thicket in which she had left Nora, her tongue paralyzed with the thoughts of the poor maiden, should she have wandered off amid the outlaws. For Nita could not interpret the sounds of combat, and knew not that the "Crimson Coyotes" were being shot down like dogs.

But we must return to the bandit camp and explain matters there.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

RIGHT AND MIGHT.

NOT long slumbered Red Reed, after the visit of Nita Nichols. His eyes opened suddenly, and a more startled human being cannot be imagined.

With an awful oath, he clutched at the bundle on his breast, and then sprang into the air—the horrible thing clinging to him!

The sleeping bandits awoke, and rushed wildly into the open; to be terrified nearly as much as their chief. Pedro Pinales believed that the dead child had come there by supernatural means, and he felt that Red Reed was doomed.

With a beast-like snarl, the outlaw chief drew his bowie, and cut loose the corpse from him. Then came the sound of rifle-shots, and these banished his superstitious fears. The pursuers had tied the dead infant to him, while he slept. Of that, he was satisfied.

Giving a loud yell of defiance, he sprang to the arbor that had been built for Nora; but the maiden was gone, and the guard slain!

Then, for the time, came the thought of his poor victim, Nita Nichols, to him.

Who, but she, would have tied their child's corpse to his breast? She it was, he had no doubt. She had rescued Nora Norrington; and, doubtless, the latter was now with Clarence Coleman, on the opposite side of the river!

Madly, the wretch rushed toward, and over the log that bridged the river; when, to his savage joy, he saw Nora, wandering around, apparently ignorant of her whereabouts.

The next minute, she was clutched in his horrible embrace; and, with one wild shriek, the girl's senses left her. But a vengeful yell echoed that shriek, and a shrill scream followed.

Then came shouts of cheer, from a distance.

One glance revealed Clarence and Nita, and Red Reed knew that a line of Texan avengers must be close behind them.

There was but one way of escape open, and that was by returning across the log bridge. But, no sooner had the wretch, still clasping the unconscious Nora Norrington, bounded upon the fallen tree, than he saw on the opposite end none other than William Lyons, with presented rifle.

With a yell, that was terrible to hear, Reed sprang from the log, into the river!

Almost instantly, there came a loud cry

from Clarence Coleman, as he cast himself into the stream, close followed by Nita Nichols and Lyons; while, upon the log, rushed six Texans, who all gazed intently into the waters.

But, their concern was soon banished.

First to arise from the stream, was the head of Red Reed, and then the ghastly face of Nora Norrington; still held by him, while the current carried them down the stream. But, almost instantly after, appeared the head of Nita, her long hair trailing on the surface behind her; as, with rapid strokes, she lunged forward, and seized the hair of her enemy and betrayer. Jerking him backward, she held him in such a manner that the miscreant could not harm her.

Fiercely Reed struggled to free himself, but Clarence Coleman speedily appeared, at once grasping Nora, and, the same moment, Nita struck her dagger into the arm of Reed that clasped his captive.

On being thus forced to release Nora, the assassin whirled and raised his arm from the waters, his bowie flashing above Nita's head; but a half-dozen revolver-shots were heard, and the knife and fingers of the dastard fell into the stream—every digit being shot away.

With beast-like ferocity Red Reed now clutched at Nita to drag her beneath the waters, realizing that he himself was doomed; but just then Lyons reached them, and wrenching him free from his victim, pushed the miscreant before him as he swam toward the bank. A minute more, and all our friends were safely on *terra firma*.

Red Reed was brought in and placed beside Pedro, who had been captured; the two wretches being bound, back to back, each cursing the other at times and then becoming silent, as they thought of the fate before them.

Nita found the corpse of her babe, and wrapping it in a blanket, laid it reverently in the shade, resolved to carry it back to San Antonio, and lay it in consecrated ground.

She then told Lyons and his men of her having taken the bandits' gold while they slept, and sinking it in the river. It was easily recovered, and praises of Nita's daring and bravery were upon every tongue.

We shall not attempt to picture the gratitude and happiness of Clarence and Nora.

Our friends remained in the camp only long enough to appropriate the horses of the "Crimson Coyotes." Pedro and Reed were bound fast upon two of these, and Nora and Clarence rode side by side, the extra animals being led by the Texans—three of them carrying as many corpses of those slain by the bandits in the short but fierce conflict.

No man on earth could be more thankful than was Clarence Coleman, knowing that he was cleared of all suspicion of the murder of Norman Norrington, or the robbery of the safe, and that his darling was by his side—secure, henceforth, from the plots of Rodney Reed.

Each and all had much to relate to each other that was strange and startling; but all this is already known to the reader, and we need not speak of it.

Equally needless is it to describe the astonishment, horror, and also admiration manifested by one and another, as the several dread and daring deeds were detailed.

CHAPTER XXXV.

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND.

It was ten o'clock on the day following that on which Red Reed and Pedro Pinales had been captured, that Lyons, with these two captives, and his own party, came to a spot but half a mile south of San Antonio. They had encamped over night on the Rio Medina.

The doomed dastard presented a truly horrid appearance; their clothing torn, their hair tangled, and their ghastly faces betokening their despair.

At the Medina that morning, one of the posse disappeared; but Lyons and the others knew well where he had gone. He had ridden on ahead, to proclaim the news in advance.

Nora Norrington knew that her father had, ere this, been buried, and that she was deprived of the privilege and duty of following him to his last resting-place. She had so

much, however, for which to be thankful, that she tried hard to forget this natural grief.

Mentally she resolved that Nita Nichols should receive at her hands every sisterly kindness; for, had it not been for her daring, Rodney Reed would, beyond a doubt, have borne her away to the Rio Grande.

Lyons advised Clarence to accompany Nora to her old home, and indicated that it would be best for Nita to go there also, promising to seek the mother of the latter, and send her to her daughter. Most certainly it would not do for the females to enter San Antonio, and witness the wild scene that must follow.

This suggestion was adopted, and Clarence Coleman, with Nora and Nita, kept on along the river road, soon reaching the mansion, where they were welcomed by the delighted negroes as from the dead.

The vast Military Plaza was packed with armed men, stern and determined.

All spoke in low, hushed voices.

Suddenly a mad yell shot simultaneously from every throat as William Lyons, at the head of his men, with the two miserable captives, dashed down the street.

It was no time for words, however.

Lariats were noosed and adjusted about the necks of the doomed men, the slack being cast over limbs and quickly grasped by many ready hands. So filled with abject terror were the miscreants that their very breath appeared to have left them.

Just then, Lyons spurred up near the condemned and called out to the crowd:

"Gentlemen, hear me a moment! I have been instrumental in capturing these men, and I think I have a right to demand from them a confession of the horrible crimes they have committed.

"It is our duty to Clarence Coleman that we force from them a confession of the murder of Mr. Norrington, and the robbery of his safe. I charge Rodney Reed with both, and Pedro Pinales as accessory. They were also principals in the assassination of the four men found slain on the following day.

"I also accuse Rodney Reed of the murder of his own child, the infant of Juanita Nichols, whom he deceived, under a promise of marriage. That is all, gentlemen!"

"Confess, or we'll skin yer alive, an' then hang yer up by the toes!"

Such was the cry of the crowd.

Red Reed suddenly braced up, and fairly shrieked:

"Yes! We did it all; and, Satan burn me if we wouldn't do it again, if—"

The wretch went no further.

He shot into the air, as did Pedro Pinales, both writhing in the agonies of strangulation.

A murmur of satisfaction ran through the mob, every eye fixed upon the revolting spectacle with a horrible fascination.

When the two miscreants hung limp, their twitching nerves the only sign of life, revolvers rattled, and their bodies were riddled with bullets.

The posse then urged their horses again toward the Main Plaza, where loud rung the shout:

"Three cheers for William Lyons and his boys!"

And deafening cheers they were.

Lyons and his men waved their sombreros, in recognition and thanks, as they galloped between the Post-office and the *Herald* office, into the Main Plaza.

There is little more to relate, in connection with the lives of those, of whom we have been hearing. Certain it is, that their future should be free from pain and grief—in a comparative sense at least.

Clarence and Nora vied with each other, in their care and sympathy for Nita Nichols and her mother; both of whom were induced to make the Norrington Mansion their home. Nearly all the gold, that was found upon the slain bandits, was given to these much-injured women.

But, Clarence Coleman was, for some days, the most bewildered man in San Antonio.

He knew not what to do.

It seemed providential to him, however, that the safe had been robbed; for, though it beggared Nora Norrington, it gave him a

chance to win a fortune, that he might restore her to the position she had always occupied.

It was a mystery to all, what disposition Red Reed could have made of the gold and stocks. No one had thought, until too late, of forcing that confession from him.

Lyons attended to the burial of poor Nita's child; and, after this, the bereaved mother became more like her former self.

One night, soon after, she made a secret trip, and recovered the remainder of the gold from the mud of the San Pedro; also unearthing that which she had buried in her garden, together with the stocks and bonds.

Nita then held an interview with Lyons, confederating with him in her plot to bring about a speedy marriage between Nora and Clarence. If the fact that the former was still a very wealthy heiress became known to her lover, he might struggle for many years, before he would be in a position, consistent with his pride, to marry.

Lyons accepted the trust, and arranged with the creditors of Norman Norrington; paying them in full, and returning valuable papers, but exacting from all, that they keep the matter secret for three months.

Clarence Coleman was surprised at the apparent unconcern of his late employer's creditors and depositors; but, believing they had been put off by the lawyers, to insure a higher price for the homestead—the sale of which would leave his darling absolutely homeless—he urged to appoint an early day for their marriage.

Rejoiced at the thought of "love in a cottage," the young girl made no objections to linking her fate with Clarence, some three months after the sad tragedy of which we have been told.

The marriage ceremony was performed in a quiet way, but few friends being present.

No sooner was it over, than Lyons and Nita informed the happy pair of what they had done, and what their worldly circumstances in reality were; all of which, the family lawyer corroborated, in a neat speech.

Clarence was dumfounded, and was the butt of many a joke, as to his having been so completely foiled in his pride, which, but for Nita, might have kept him separated from his love for years.

However, there was no help for it.

Clarence was too happy to regret his having been so impatient to wed Nora, and all passed off as happily as such occasions should.

Mrs. Nichols became housekeeper for the youthful pair, Nita developing into an independent sister of mercy, visiting the sick and attending to their wants. The poor Mexicans of the Alamo City always removed their sombreros in respectful politeness as she passed, for her active and self-denying charities had blotted out from their minds the sad page in her earlier life—the period in which she had known and loved Red Reed, the Captain of the "Crimson Coyotes."

THE END.

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